



## **Personal Emancipation or Cultural Recognition: A Dalit Dilemma**

### **On the strategic and emotional dilemmas of politicising identity and caste in the Dalit movement in the South Indian state of Karnataka**

Lillelund, Caroline Johanne

*Publication date:*  
2013

*Document version*  
Other version

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lillelund, C. J. (2013). Personal Emancipation or Cultural Recognition: A Dalit Dilemma: On the strategic and emotional dilemmas of politicising identity and caste in the Dalit movement in the South Indian state of Karnataka.

Master's Thesis, Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen

# Personal Emancipation or Cultural Recognition: A Dalit Dilemma

On the strategic and emotional dilemmas of politicising identity and caste in the Dalit movement in the south Indian state of Karnataka



By Caroline Johanne Lillelund, March 2013  
Supervisor Helle Bundgaard



**Front-page illustration:**

The activist Shiva speaks at the Dalit organisation Dalita mattu Mahila Chaluvadi's celebration of *Ambedkar Jayanti* in a village on the outskirts of Bangalore city on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

**Policy of names:**

The names of Dalit movement leaders and activists appearing in this thesis are *not* pseudonyms. Since the thesis deals with politics and public debate, many of the key informants of the study are well-known, public figures representing widely known organisations and groupings propagating distinct identities and political visions for the Dalits. Therefore, it is impossible to anonymise the identity of many of the informants without a disturbing loss of meaning and information. No informants of the study have either have asked for or been promised anonymity. However, I have taken great care not to include any private or personal information that could be compromising for the informants.

Word count of the thesis excluding footnotes, bibliography and abstract: 27274 words.

## CONTENTS

<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>Introduction: Conflicting Ideas of Dalit Liberation .....</b>	<b>2</b>
The line of inquiry .....	4
Political dilemmas of stigmatised identities.....	7
Caste in contemporary India: Hierarchy or difference? .....	9
Outline of the thesis .....	11
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Approaching the Empirical and Analytical Field .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Informants and field methods.....	15
Political involvement and analytical distance .....	17
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>The Making of the Untouchables and the Politicisation of Caste .....</b>	<b>19</b>
The emergence of the Untouchables .....	19
Anti-Brahminism and the ethnicisation of caste .....	21
B.R. Ambedkar and the politicisation of ‘untouchability’ .....	23
The institutionalisation of caste in independent India.....	24
The Scheduled Castes in contemporary Karnataka.....	25
Summary .....	28
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>Dalit Struggle in Karnataka and the Changing Discourses of Indian Politics..</b>	<b>29</b>
From redistribution to recognition?.....	29
The Bhim Sena: A separatist vision for the Dalits .....	30
The ‘bhoosa incident’ and the emergence of a revolutionary Dalit movement.....	32
The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti.....	34
The ‘identity turn’ of Indian politics and the fragmentation of the Dalit movement ...	38
New political actors, agendas and identities .....	40
Summary .....	42

## **Chapter 5**

### **Imagining Liberation: Personal Emancipation or Cultural Recognition? .....43**

Representing Dalit identity .....	44
Universalist visions of personal emancipation.....	46
Liberation through caste-based parliamentary power .....	49
Communitarian visions of cultural recognition .....	52
Questioning universalism.....	57
Summary .....	59

## **Chapter 6**

### **Dalit Dilemmas of Identity, Solidarity and Belonging .....60**

Institutionalised oppression or social resource?.....	61
A difference that makes a difference .....	62
Politics of caste and marriage .....	64
A sense of belonging.....	67
Summary .....	68

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion .....70**

### **Bibliography .....73**

Internet Resources.....	80
-------------------------	----

### **Abstract .....82**



## PREFACE

In September 2001, the Dalit movement made its way into the international news stream, when more than two hundred Indian NGO activists agitated against the discrimination of the formerly so-called untouchable castes under the banner of 'Dalit Human Rights' at the NGO forum accompanying the United Nations' 'World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance' in Durban, South Africa. The participation of the Indian NGO activists at the UN conference marked the globalisation of the term 'Dalit', which today is part of the shared 'politically correct' vocabulary of NGOs, scholars and the media in India and internationally.

It was also about this time that I first heard the word 'Dalit'. Though I had spent a year in Bangalore, the capital of the south Indian state Karnataka, as a volunteer in a cultural exchange programme in 1993 and later on studied several courses on Indian ethnography, I had never come across the term before. Little did I know that the topics 'Dalit identity' and 'Dalit politics' would soon outdo 'communalism' and 'Hindu nationalism' as the preferred objects of research in the study of popular politics in contemporary India. In this regard, the present study reflects the contemporary appeal and strength of the Indian Dalit movement, even as it exposes its weaknesses.

The thesis has been long under way. In the course of the over nine years that have passed since I completed my fieldwork in November 2003, the Dalit movement in Karnataka has developed and changed: new organisations and alliances have emerged, old ones have fallen apart and the key issues of the movement have shifted with the overall political development. However, the fundamental dilemmas related to the assertion and politicisation of Dalit identity remain topical and I believe that the thesis – for all its shortcomings – contributes to a fuller understanding of the internal contradictions, which continue to characterise the Dalit movement in Karnataka and in India at large.

I owe my sincere thanks to all the leaders, activists and sympathisers of the Dalit movement who spent hours and days discussing with me and explained me about their lives and political visions. Everywhere, I was received with incredible enthusiasm, friendliness and hospitality. I also owe my heartfelt thanks to Gauri, my long-time friend, who – as always – received me with exceptional hospitality and supported me unconditionally throughout the fieldwork.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: CONFLICTING IDEAS OF DALIT LIBERATION

*'Dalit is just a notion, Madam!'* The middle-aged university reader raised his voice and looked insistently at me. *'There are no Dalits,'* he continued: *'It is just a notion, an imagination. It has no cultural base, it has no social base, not even a political base and I don't think that the term Dalit will be there in ten years.'* It was one of my last days of fieldwork. During the past eleven months, I had come across some rather diverging interpretations – and even rejections – of Dalit identity. Still, nobody had so forcefully insisted on giving up 'Dalit' as the collective designation of the 'untouchable' castes and with that the very idea of inter-caste solidarity, as did this man. The Bangalore-based university reader, T.H. Murthy, had participated in the Dalit movement for many years and now had his own small, independent group of followers. He was utterly disappointed with the meagre results of the Dalit movement's struggle and had started encouraging the formation of a strong caste-based organisation with the purpose of establishing banks, educational institutions and medical services exclusively for the social and economic uplift of the Holeya caste, to which he himself belonged.

It was a disillusioned man who spoke to me that afternoon, a man who had once strongly believed in the promises of the Dalit movement's groundbreaking struggle against discrimination, humiliation and poverty and in the long-term goal of a complete abolition of caste distinctions. Now he was deeply frustrated over the missing solidarity between the different castes participating in the Dalit movement and over what he considered as the egoism of the emerging Dalit middleclass, including many of the leaders of the Dalit movement. Most importantly, he had radically changed his views on the social institution of caste and had begun to regard caste communities as the natural loci of solidarity and as powerful vehicles for social change. In his view, focus had to be changed from struggling against the widespread discrimination and human rights violations to struggling for the education and economic development of particularly the rural sections of the 'untouchable' caste communities. *'So far, for all these years we have unnecessarily wasted our energy to protest against the practice of untouchability, but nothing has happened, there is no relaxation. Madam, we should forget about the concept of untouchability and start our own institutions in the name of community.'*

A few days before my meeting and interview with T.H. Murthy, I had interviewed another long-time Dalit activist, the writer and journalist Indudhara

Honnapura. After a ten-year pause, he had recently rejoined the Dalit movement together with a couple of other experienced senior activists with the aim of revitalising the large, leading Dalit organisation in Karnataka, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), the organisation in which also T.H. Murthy had earlier participated. Like T.H. Murthy, Indudhara Honnapura was frustrated and disappointed with the contemporary Dalit movement, but for completely different reasons. Indudhara Honnapura thought that the Dalit movement was presently falling apart and weakening itself, because new organisations within the movement chose to mobilise people on the basis of distinct 'untouchable' caste identities, instead of organising them collectively in the name of Dalits against the very institution of caste.

Indudhara Honnapura was one of the young leftist writers, who in the early 1970s instigated the formation of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. He was now in his late forties and had been very successful as a journalist, for many years running his own mainstream political news magazine. Like T.H. Murthy, Indudhara Honnapura had thus managed to move away from his impoverished, rural background and entered the affluent urban middle class. Still, he did not find the struggle for economic uplift of the 'untouchable' castes nearly as important as the struggle against caste and untouchability. *'Economic empowerment is good, but that is not the ultimate thing for Dalits,'* he explained. In his opinion the main problem for the 'untouchable' castes was still the stigmatisation and discrimination associated with their low position in the religiously sanctioned caste hierarchy. Even though practices of untouchability had decreased considerably over the past decades, he explained, discrimination was now again becoming socially acceptable in wider circles as a consequence of the communalist discourses of the ruling Hindu nationalist 'Bharatiya Janata Party' (BJP). *'See, even in Bangalore, this so-called cosmopolitan city, people are practising untouchability. In the hotels [teahouses], they are keeping separate glasses for the sweeper community people. The same vessels cannot be used by other people.'* In Indudhara Honnapura's understanding, it was the Hindu ideology of purity and pollution, declaring some people as elevated and pure and others as low and polluting, which was the root cause of the former 'untouchable' castes' persistent suffering. To end discrimination, it was therefore necessary to challenge and subvert the very institution of caste and its religious underpinnings. *'If caste is not totally eradicated, discrimination cannot be avoided,'* he declared.

### **The line of inquiry**

The very different approaches to caste, identity and Dalit movement politics, expressed by the two senior Dalit activists, set the scene for the present study and illustrate the profound internal contradictions in the Dalit movement in Karnataka at the beginning of the 2000s. After thirty years of struggle, the political identity of Dalit was increasingly coming under pressure from different sides within the movement, while the aims, demands and strategies of the movement were becoming gradually more heterogeneous and internally contradictory compared to earlier times.

As illustrated by the statements of the two activists, some of the overriding differences of opinion were related to the political priorities of the Dalit movement and to the meanings attributed to the social institution of caste. While the Dalit movement had originally been a radical anti-caste movement blaming the social and economic deprivation of the 'untouchable' castes on the inhuman and oppressive institution of caste, still more Dalit activists and organisations now voiced the opinion that caste was an integral, even natural part of Indian culture and history, which could and should not be abolished. According to this line of reasoning, it was the unequal distribution of power, wealth and social status between the different castes in the Indian society which was the problem, not the institution of caste in itself. The Dalit movement was thus marked by the schism that has characterised most identity-based social movements for the past more than thirty years from the movements of gays and lesbians, women and African Americans in Europe and North America to the indigenous peoples' movements in South and Central America (Bernstein 1997; Gamson 1995; Hervik 2001; Jasper 2010). In all cases some factions reject the notion of essentially different cultural identities while others celebrate it. The notion of identity thus gives rise to profound dilemmas when it is used in the political interest of historically oppressed and stigmatised groups, while the articulation of cultural difference in relation to the rest of the society may simultaneously expose the social and political differences and divisions within the group.

In this thesis, I address the growing political split of the Dalit movement in Karnataka in the beginning of the 2000s and discuss why the politicisation of caste and Dalit identity was giving rise to such profound internal disagreements. What was causing the increasing discontent of many Dalit activists and why had large parts of the Dalit movement in reality abandoned the struggle against caste and untouchability in favour of a struggle for cultural recognition and political power and representation?

Central to the study is the political identity of Dalit, which for decades has united the activists and sympathisers of the Dalit movement. Literally, the Sanskrit-

derived word *dalit* means ‘split’, ‘broken’ or ‘torn to pieces’ and in Hindi, Marathi and other north Indian languages the word has been used as a common expression for poor and oppressed people long before the emergence of the Dalit movement (Shah 2001b: 195). However, it was not until the emergence of the Dalit movement in the early 1970s that ‘Dalit’ (now usually with a capital D) was coined as a political identity. The incipient Dalit movement used ‘Dalit’ as a self-chosen, proud and defiant identity to express their resistance and contempt towards the institution of caste and to counter the degrading and polluting connotations of the proper names of the ‘untouchable’ castes. By the 2000s, however, the identity of Dalit had lost much of its revolutionary zest as the term had crept into the popular and politically correct vocabulary of the media, the academia and the NGOs as a common designation for either the ‘untouchable’ castes or the slightly larger administrative category of Scheduled Castes to which the ‘untouchable’ castes belong. As this study shows, however, the political and cultural meanings ascribed to the identity of Dalit still varied considerably within the Dalit movement and continued to be an issue of contestation.

The past decade, a number of studies from different parts of India have discussed the political conflicts on the interpretation of Dalit identity that everywhere seems to divide the Dalit movement (Chigateri 2008; Ciotti 2010; Gorringer 2005b; Guru 2001; Guru & Chakravarty 2005; Racine & Racine 1998; Shah 2001b). Many of these studies are very critical of the new, contemporary tendencies of Dalit politics that give priority to issues of community building and cultural identity formation instead of struggling against the overall structures of caste and class. It is argued that the new, community-oriented brand of Dalit struggle is detrimental to the interest of impoverished, rural Dalits because it largely disregards the struggle against poverty (Guru & Chakravarty 2005; Shah 2001b), and because the struggle for cultural and political recognition allegedly ends up consolidating the very structures and identities of caste that cause the oppression (Gorringer 2005b; Shah 2001a). Writing on the Dalit movement in the state of Tamil Nadu, the Belgian sociologist, Hugo Gorringer (2005b) moreover argues that the contemporary ‘identity politics’ of the Dalit movement is leading to innumerable caste-based divisions that weaken the movement and undermine inter-caste solidarity between the ‘untouchable’ castes.

Regrettably, these severe critiques have not yet been followed up by studies that attempt to understand the emotions and political rationales that give rise to the changes in political visions and priorities of large parts of the Dalit movement. As the American sociologist, Mary Bernstein, rightly notes ‘analyses of identity are often mixed with normative political evaluations about what constitutes worthwhile collective efforts geared toward social change’ (Bernstein 2005: 66), while the underlying rationales,

motivations and strategies of the activists are often left unexplained. Therefore, the main analytical ambition of this thesis is to shed light on the different perceptions, experiences and emotions of identity and caste that inform the political opinions of Dalit leaders and activists in Karnataka.

In the course of the following chapters, I will look into the political schism of the Dalit movement in its historical and contemporary (early 2000s) contexts and examine a number of different political positions expressed by former and present members of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. Taking the political identity of Dalit as a starting point, I will describe how this identity has been represented and negotiated in relation to the shifting political agendas of the Dalit movement since its early emergence and show how contemporary political positions are related to radically different visions of equality, culture and community.

The analysis draws on a wide body of analytical work notably by scholars of anthropology, sociology and political science as it examines the historicity of the conflicting identity claims and political agendas of different parts of the Dalit movement and looks into the self-assessments, evaluations and emotions that gives rise to the very different views on caste, identity and Dalit liberation. While the main emphasis is on the meanings attributed to caste and identity by leaders and activists at the time of fieldwork and on their contemporary political views and visions, I have chosen also to include the historical development of the movement and its political fragmentation in the analysis. In doing so, I attempt to show that the political disagreements in the Dalit movement over questions of caste and identity have evolved as part of a general political development in which issues of cultural and religious identity have gradually become more central in national and international politics compared to issues of economic development and redistribution. However, it is the overall argument of the thesis that the increasing splits and conflicts in the Dalit movement of Karnataka are not only the result of a widespread change in the ideological and strategic approaches to the issue of Dalit liberation, but actually reflect a general ambiguity towards the institution of caste among most of the Dalit activists. The contradictory interpretations of caste and identity do therefore not only profoundly split the Dalit movement, they also present a dilemma to the individual activist, which is difficult to solve without making personal and political compromises.

In focusing on the Dalit movement in a single Indian state, the thesis emphasises the localised nature of Dalit politics in India. The numerous organisations of the Dalit movement have traditionally confined themselves to the state in which they originate and even though NGO networks as well as the political party, the 'Bahujan Samaj Party' (BSP), have attempted to mobilise followers across state boundaries since the mid-1990s, the Dalit movement generally remains rooted in state politics. Since the

social composition, internal debates and political challenges of the Dalit movement vary considerably from state to state, detailed localised studies are essential for understanding the greater picture of the Dalit movement and the dilemmas informing the political choices of its leaders and activists. Studies of the Dalit movement from different Indian states thus reveal large differences in the political agendas and identities pursued and promoted, as well as a striking similarity in some of the strategic and emotional dilemmas confronted (e.g., Chigateri 2008; Ciotti 2010; Gorringer 2005a; Hardtmann 2003; Pai 2002).<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that the Dalit movement in Karnataka for many years was one of the strongest and most dynamic and groundbreaking Dalit movements in the country (Omvedt 1993: 62pp.) there exist only few contemporary studies of the movement published in English (notably Chigateri 2008). Today, the Dalit movement in Karnataka has lost its leading position, yet the heterogeneity of organisations participating in the movement and the vastly different viewpoints and agendas it encompasses makes it an appropriate place to study the ongoing negotiation of Dalit identity and the dilemmas involved in the process.

### **Political dilemmas of stigmatised identities**

Collective identity formation plays an important part in the making of all social movements. To mobilise people for collective action it is essential to be able to formulate a distinct collective identity as a basis for the political conflict that the movement promotes (Bernstein 2005; della Porta & Diani 2006). This counts for the classic labour movements (Famiglietti 2001) as well as for the so-called 'new social movements' like for example the environmentalist movement, the women's movement and the peace movement. In this regard, identity should not be thought of as a property or specific characteristic of individual participants or a group of collective actors, but as the meanings attributed to their traits, life occurrences and social situation that are produced in the process of mobilisation and collective action (della Porta & Diani 2006). Though usually portrayed – and portraying themselves – as a homogenous and coherent group, participants of social movements generally have quite different personal and political motives for participating. It is thus through the process of collective action that the 'we' of the movement is developed among the participants in contrast to the 'they' of the movement's political opponents and along with that the feelings of solidarity and

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the Dalit movement does not really have a pan-Indian presence, but is essentially restricted to the state of Maharashtra, the three south Indian states Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and to the northern states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In other states, people belonging to the 'untouchable' castes have been drawn towards other political movements, like the militant, Maoist movement of *Naxalites* in Bihar or the Hindu nationalist movement in Gujarat – or they have simply not involved themselves much in popular politics.

belonging that tie the participants together (ibid. 2006). This also counts for the participants of the Dalit movement in Karnataka who have usually not identified themselves as 'Dalits' before getting involved in the movement.

However, political mobilisation around a stigmatised identity, like that of Dalit, presents a number of strategic and emotional dilemmas since the stigmatised identity is both the basis of oppression and the basis of political power (Gamson 1995: 390). Social movements of Dalits, African Americans, indigenous people, women, and gays and lesbians among others thus share the condition that the identities around which the respective movements are organised are also the basis of the discrimination and contempt that the activists and followers suffer and struggle to overcome. In these movements, a shared collective identity is not only prerequisite for – and a corollary of – joint mobilisation; the notion of identity is also deployed strategically to further the movements' aims of profoundly changing the imposed, stigmatised identities of the participants (Bernstein 1997, 2005). Mobilising people on the basis of a stigmatised identity, however, always entails the risk of reinforcing not only the imposed identity of the group, but also the stigma adhering to it. The realisation of this dilemma – 'the dilemma of stigmatized identities', as the American sociologist and social movement scholar James Jasper (2010) terms it – has indeed been one of the strongest arguments against the Dalit movement's increased focus on recognition (cf. Gorringer 2005b; Shah 2001a). Gorringer thus argues that the 'identity politics' of the Dalit movement in effect has 'rejuvenated a politics of caste rather than undermining the basis on which Dalits [...] are oppressed' and hence diluted its original anti-caste ideology (2005b: 660). On the other hand, Gorringer acknowledges that caste identities – in spite of their constructed character – are socio-political facts which cannot be ignored or wished away and that a decidedly non-identitarian ideal of politics would render political resistance to caste-based discrimination and oppression impossible (ibid. 667pp.).

Comparing the Dalit movement in India to the movement of African Americans in the United States, Jasper shows that the two movements historically both have been torn between pursuing a politics of 'mainstreaming' and a politics of separatism (Jasper 2010). The same two political impulses are according to the American sociologists Joshua Gamson (1995) and Mary Bernstein (1997; 2005) found in the movements of lesbians and gays and in the women's movement in the United States. It is thus a general dilemma for social movements of stigmatised groups to decide whether to work for inclusion in the mainstream society and thus for a dissolution of their separate identity or to stress their cultural difference and uniqueness and uphold a distance to the hegemonic society that excludes and discriminates against them exactly because of this identity. While the struggle against the imposition of identity tends to present the

stigmatised groups as victims of the oppression of the hegemonic 'mainstream' society, the struggle for cultural recognition and autonomy, on the other hand, emphasises cultural pride and self-glorification (Ciotti 2010; Jasper 2010). The strategic dilemma of stigmatised identities thus entails a choice between victimhood and self-glorification which has direct consequences for the self-image and self-esteem of the activists.

None of the above scholars directly reflects on the relation between the individual and the community when they address the political dilemmas inherent to political struggles against identity-based discrimination. However, the case of the Dalit movement in Karnataka shows that it is fundamental to examine the meanings attributed to the relationship between the individual and the community when analysing the contradictory impulses of mainstreaming and separatism that divide political movements of stigmatised communities. When the Dalit movement in Karnataka is torn between a desire to undermine and completely take apart the social institution of caste and a desire to nurture and glorify the unique identities of the Scheduled Castes, it is thus reflecting the existence of two very different ways of perceiving caste and identity. As I shall argue, the political schism of the Dalit movement does therefore not only reflect a strategic dilemma, but also a much deeper personal and emotional dilemma, relating to the innate dichotomy between the individual and the community (Mines 1994) and to the ambiguous reality of caste (Fuller 2001; Jayaram 1996). How Dalit identity is understood and represented by activist of the Dalit movement is in other words intimately related to the way that the institution of caste itself is experienced and construed.

### **Caste in contemporary India: Hierarchy or difference?**

The political schism dividing the Dalit movement has maybe been most directly pronounced by the NGO network the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), which took the question of caste to the UN world conference in Durban 2001 and argued that 'casteism' is actually a form of racism. The NCDHR used – and still uses<sup>2</sup> – the slogan 'let's cast out caste' simultaneously with the slogan 'Dalit – a people, a culture, a history' indicating on the one hand that caste is 'bad' and should be abolished and on the other that the Dalits constitute a community with a unique culture and history that should be celebrated and preserved.

The two evidently contradictory slogans represent two concurrent, but radically different interpretations of caste, which are not only prevalent in the Dalit movement, but permeate the entire Indian society as well as the scholarly approaches to caste. As a

---

<sup>2</sup> See the website of NCDHR at: <http://www.ncdhr.org.in>



number of scholars have pointed out, the notion of caste at the same time denotes a rigid, univocal, religiously sanctioned status hierarchy encompassing the entire Indian Hindu population *and* the totality of discrete, culturally different communities that compete for status, power and collective rights in the Indian society (Fuller 2001, Gupta 2004, Jayaram 1996, Srinivas 1996). In the words of the Indian sociologist N. Jayaram, castes can thus 'be viewed either as being functionally interrelated in a *system* contributing to the vertical integration of a rigidly stratified society, or as autonomous *groups* serving common purposes and striving for common ends. Viewed as the former, castes constitutes a *structural principle* of society, and viewed as the latter, it acts as a *dynamic force* in interest of articulation, collective mobilisation, and social movement' (1996: 71).<sup>3</sup>

The most well-known and influential academic proponent of the idea of caste as constituting a univocal hierarchical system is undisputedly the French anthropologist Louis Dumont. In his principal work, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Dumont (2002) argues that the caste hierarchy is the quintessential feature of Indian society and structured by a religious principle of ritual purity that subordinates secular power to religious status. According to this interpretation, the caste hierarchy and its underpinning principles of graded degrees of ritual purity and pollution are accepted and internalised by all Hindus, high and low and therefore it makes no sense to talk about power, oppression or discrimination in connection to caste.

By now, a large number of ethnographic studies have shown that the hierarchy of caste is not marked by consensus – and probably never was (Fuller 2001).<sup>4</sup> Still, the hierarchical model of the Indian caste order, now usually depicting caste as an essentially oppressive social institution, is widely prevalent among scholars, activists and the general public in India and abroad, making the predominant lay notion of caste equal to the dominant academic view (Gupta 2000). Increasingly, however, another view of caste is gaining ground among scholars that emphasise the cultural or ethnic-like properties of caste (Charsley & Karanth 1998; Reddy 2005). One of the most ardent proponents of this interpretation, the Indian sociologist Dipankar Gupta (2000; 2004; 2005), argues that caste is essentially based on cultural difference. According to Gupta, castes are, first and foremost, discrete social entities that define themselves in relation to each other and compete internally to further their respective social, economic and cultural interests. The Indian caste order is thus characterised by contesting notions of hierarchy, since all

---

<sup>3</sup> Italics by the author.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, this should also have been quite evident in 1966 when the French edition of *Homo Hierarchicus* was first published, considering the widespread political struggle of the lower castes against the dominance of the Brahminical castes, not least in the State of Tamil Nadu (then 'Madras State') where Dumont made his fieldwork.

castes aim for a higher social status and no caste will accept to occupy the lowest position in the status hierarchy. In this interpretation, caste is a form of social stratification that rests on differences of culture and identity and not the result of a consensual or imposed Hindu ideology of purity and pollution that permanently fixes the social status of all communities.

As this thesis will demonstrate, both notions of hierarchy and notions of difference inform the Dalit activists' attitudes towards caste in Karnataka. Many – maybe even most – Dalit activists at the same time experience their caste identities as a reason for denial of respect, individuality and human worth and as a source of solidarity and belonging. Caste is thus interpreted both as a hierarchical and oppressive social structure and as a valuable social institution that contributes positively to the cultural identity of the individual. The strategic dilemma of the Dalit movement whether to struggle for the complete abolition of caste or for the social and economic strengthening of the Scheduled Castes – collectively or individually – is therefore also an emotional dilemma. As the Indian literary critic, D.R. Nagaraj (1993) has pointed out the Dalit movement's historic struggle to abolish caste in fact constitutes 'a wilful amnesia' towards its past, since the erasure of caste distinctions inevitably entails a loss of cultural identity and belonging.

While issues of identity, culture and belonging play an increasingly important part in the contemporary Dalit movement, it is still quite common for – particularly foreign – politicians, scholars and NGO workers to emphasise only the hierarchical interpretation of caste and unanimously condemn all practices of caste as oppressive, humiliating and intrinsically wrong.<sup>5</sup> Regrettably, the interpretation of caste as unequivocally backward, immoral and pernicious prevents the understanding of the current developments and political controversies in the Indian Dalit movement and may even be detrimental to the cause of the groups that e.g., NGOs wish to support (Lerche 2008).

### **Outline of the thesis**

The thesis is divided into a further six chapters in which the argument is gradually developed. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I will briefly describe the empirical field of the study and account for some of the methods that I have used to generate ethnographic data.

---

<sup>5</sup> An example of a prominent NGO – or rather NGO network – that unambiguously condemns caste for being an intrinsically oppressive social institution is the Copenhagen-based 'International Dalit Solidarity Network' (IDSN). See <http://www.idsn.org>

Chapter 3 describes how the social category of ‘Untouchables’ has been constructed, politicised and institutionalised in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the overall processes of democratisation and modernisation in pre- and post-colonial India as a means of contextualising the schism of the contemporary Dalit movement.

In Chapter 4, I examine the history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka from its emergence in the early-mid 1970s up until the early 2000s and describe how the identity of Dalit has been interpreted and negotiated in relation to the changing and still more differentiated and contradictory political agendas of the movement.

In Chapter 5, I examine the ideological and strategic dilemmas related to the representation of Dalit identity. Taking a departure in the notion of Dalit identity, I examine how ‘Dalit’ is interpreted by different activists and organisations and how these interpretations are related to conceptions of oppression and liberation.

In Chapter 6, I examine some of the personal and emotional dilemmas related to the politicisation of caste identity and point out how these dilemmas are related to the ambiguous meanings of caste and cultural identity in contemporary India.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I briefly sum up the main findings of the thesis.

## CHAPTER 2

### APPROACHING THE EMPIRICAL AND ANALYTICAL FIELD

The fieldwork took place in and around Bangalore<sup>6</sup>, the capital of Karnataka, between December 2002 and November 2003.

Being the capital city, Bangalore is home to many different types of Dalit organisations and political networks from students groups and neighbourhood associations to political parties and internationally funded NGOs. Some of the most prominent leaders and intellectuals of the Dalit movement live in Bangalore and throughout the year demonstrations, political meetings and seminars of the Dalit movement take place in the city. The choice of Bangalore as the primary site of fieldwork thus made it possible for me to include a number of different Dalit organisations and groupings in the study and enabled a broad-based approach to the analysis of Dalit identity politics, making use of juxtapositions and comparisons of identity claims and political positions.

Compared with the rural areas in Karnataka, however, the Dalit movement is rather weak in Bangalore, where people from the slums and from the so-called ‘creamy layer’ urban middleclass are generally less inclined to identify themselves as Dalits. The grassroots level of the Dalit movement in Bangalore is therefore not typical of the movement in other parts of Karnataka, particularly not the rural areas which continue to be the stronghold of the movement. Because of the relatively low support of city dwellers, many Bangalore-based activists gave priority to the rural areas and spent much of their time visiting local branches of their respective organisations in smaller towns and villages. In fact, many activists were constantly on the move between meetings, seminars and demonstrations in different districts of the state and some leaders also went to other parts of India or even abroad. In order to participate actively in the movement I therefore often accompanied leaders and activists from different organisations in Bangalore to places outside the city to participate in political functions, protest rallies or meetings with local grassroots. The many trips outside Bangalore significantly broadened the empirical field of my study as I met activists from many different towns and villages in southern

---

<sup>6</sup> ‘Bangalore’ is an anglicised version of *Bengaluru*, which is the name of the city in Kannada language. In 2005, the government of Karnataka decided to rename Bangalore as Bengaluru. However, the new spelling has not yet caught on in written English and since this study took place before the renaming, I have chosen to retain the spelling ‘Bangalore’.

Karnataka and learned about the local struggles of the Dalit movement that typically regarded concrete instances of discrimination and inter-caste conflict.

Even though I had initially chosen Bangalore as the geographical site of the study, the scope of my fieldwork thus gradually broadened as I followed the activists of various Dalit movement organisations through different locations and studied how Dalit identity was expressed and represented by different actors. The definition of the empirical field of the study was therefore an ongoing process in which new organisations, locations and informants were gradually included as I became aware of them and their relevance for the study. My study thereby differs from most other field-based studies of the Dalit movement that tend to focus on either single Dalit organisations (e.g., Gorringe 2005a; Pai 2002) or compare two or three organisations within the broader context of the Dalit movement (e.g., Chigateri 2008).<sup>7</sup>

The broad, processual approach to the definition of the field helped me to recognise the complex web of personal and organisational relations that intertwine the different parts of the Dalit movement and tie them together in a loose network structure across political barriers. Like other social movements, the Dalit movement in Karnataka is characterised by what the Italian social movement scholars Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani describe as ‘dense, informal networks’, in which ‘individual and organised actors, while keeping their autonomy and independence, engage in sustained exchanges of resources in pursuit of common goals’ (della Porta & Diani 2006: 21). As a social movement, the Dalit movement is not just a contemporary totality of individuals, groups and formal organisations that organise themselves politically in the name of Dalits. It is rather a dynamic social space where identities, strategies and political visions are continuously negotiated and where alliances and collaborations between the different collective actors are regularly formed and broken. As I have already mentioned a number of individuals and organisations in fact rejected the term Dalit, but did nonetheless form part of the Dalit movement since they were identified as part of the movement by other actors and were engaged in the same broadly defined collective struggle against caste-based discrimination and oppression.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> My approach to the Dalit movement as a field of study to some extent resembles that of the Swedish anthropologist Eva-Maria Hardtmann, who in her study of the Dalit movement defines her field as ‘interrelational’ (2003: 17) and describes how she was ‘moving among people, things and ideas’ in a number of different locations (ibid. 35). While Hardtmann’s methodical strategy of ‘following the field’ led her to a number of different locations around India and ended up taking her to various Buddhist communities in England, the frame of the state of Karnataka, however, remains important to this study.

<sup>8</sup> Following a general trend in contemporary social movement theory (della Porta & Diani 2006; Zald and McCarthy 1987), I make a distinction between social movements and social movement organisations, with the latter being independent organisations participating in the larger

## Informants and field methods

When I arrived in Bangalore in December 2002, I had no pre-established contact with any organisations or activists participating in the Dalit movement. Except for a few organisations, notably the Dalit NGOs and the state branch of the 'Bahujan Samaj Party' (BSP), the organisations in the Dalit movement had no offices or official telephone numbers, let alone web sites or e-mail addresses.<sup>9</sup> To get in touch with the Dalit movement I thus had to make personal contacts with people participating in the movement. My very first acquaintances were a catholic priest involved in an organisation of Christian Dalits, so-called Dalit Christians, and a sociology lecturer, who had earlier participated in the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS); both were men, whom my supervisor, Stig Toft Madsen, had coincidentally met at a conference in Germany a couple of months before. Moreover, I contacted a leader of a small Bangalore-based NGO who was widely known for her involvement in the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). Through these first acquaintances I got the names and telephone numbers of more Dalit movement activists and they usually again suggested me new persons to contact. This way I gradually established a network of informants – or more correctly: I myself became part of some of the existing networks that constitute the Dalit movement.<sup>10</sup>

In the beginning, most of my informants were present or former leaders and activists from the large leading Dalit organisations in Karnataka. Now in their forties and fifties, many of these people – all of them men – had participated in the Dalit movement since the 1970s and thus had decades of experience with Dalit activism. They were generally easy for me to interview and discuss with since they were mostly well educated

---

framework of a social movement together with an indefinite number of other organisations, groups and individuals. Like the Dalit movement at large, the organisations participating in the Dalit movement in most cases have blurred boundaries and an uncertain and fluctuating number of members or followers. However, most organisations forming part of the Dalit movement distinguish themselves by having formal organisational structures, usually with an elected, (self-) appointed, or employed leader and a supplementary number of elected, appointed, or employed office bearers.

<sup>9</sup> Since my fieldwork in 2002/2003, a few of the Dalit movement actors that I studied have made homepages on the internet. For instance the fortnightly journal Dalit Voice has had a homepage since 2004 (<http://www.dalitvoice.org>), while the national party *Bahujan Samaj Party* got a homepage in 2009 (<http://www.bspindia.org>).

<sup>10</sup> Initially and throughout the fieldwork, I also received much help from the always-helpful staff at the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore (ISI), a Jesuit run research and educational centre, which among many other activities conducts training camps and courses for Dalit activists from all over South India. See <http://www.isibl.org>

and having a very good command of English.<sup>11</sup> Having discussed issues of caste, identity and politics throughout their adult life, the experienced activists could often easily relate to my initially rather abstract and theoretical questions about Dalit identity and political ideology and they often engaged themselves in lengthy theoretical discussions with me. As the fieldwork progressed and I became more familiar with the Dalit movement, however, I increasingly made acquaintances with the often less politically eloquent rank-and-file activists and casual sympathisers of the movement, who had just turned up for a particular demonstration or meeting. Moreover, I got to know the younger activists of a number of new Dalit organisations and students groups, who often had a completely different perspective on Dalit politics, embedded in contemporary everyday experience or relating to an altogether different theoretical understanding of caste and identity, inspired for instance by a post-structuralist, Foucaultian way of theorising power and identity.

I thus moved in a field populated by both experienced activists and political novices, belonging to the educated middle class as well as to the uneducated poor – and not least to the growing class of educated poor. The informants of my study are thus evidence of the vast heterogeneity which characterises the participants in the Dalit movement in Karnataka. On one point, however, the informants were amazingly alike: they were almost all men, as are the great majority of people participating in the Dalit movement. Male leaders generally even dominated organisations – mostly NGOs – that had an explicit focus on Dalit women's rights and in the broader parts of the Dalit movement, gender was barely discussed. My informants' perspectives on caste, identity and caste-based oppression were therefore mostly male perspectives and when the question of Dalit identity came up in discussion, it was almost invariably a male identity that 'Dalit' was supposed to refer to. For me as a fieldworker, however, the gender bias of the Dalit movement was mostly a matter of fact, which did not pose any methodical challenges to the study.

Throughout the fieldwork I tried to participate in as many – and as many different – political and cultural activities of the Dalit movement as possible. I thus participated in anything from small semi-private meetings and social get-togethers to

---

<sup>11</sup>The 'working language' of the Dalit movement in Karnataka was Kannada, which is the official language of the state and the first language of the majority of the activists in the Dalit movement. While most of the leaders and educated activists in Bangalore spoke English – broken or fluid – many activists from the villages and urban slums spoke only a few words of English. During my stay in Karnataka, I took Kannada classes twice a week and about halfway through the fieldwork I was capable of conducting simple conversations with Kannada-speaking activists. I attempted a few times to work with hired interpreters, but it did not work out well. Instead, I usually relied on interpretation from other activists in the group or organisation, who had a better command of English or I asked the help of family members or neighbours of the activists, if I visited them at home – or simply tried to make the most of my broken Kannada.

large protest rallies and *dharnas*<sup>12</sup> in front of government buildings and police offices with thousands or ten thousands of participants. In these situations, I often took up casual conversations with rank-and-file activists or followers and sympathisers of the different organisations and sometimes arranged a subsequent meeting with them to make a more formal interview. Methodically, I thus constantly combined participant observation, conversation, discussions and interviews. In fact, the different methods were always somehow overlapping since observation and participation always is part of the interview situation, and participant observation in social settings usually involves a great deal of verbal interaction with the (observed) actors of the field.

### **Political involvement and analytical distance**

Since political discussion is one of the principal activities of the activists in the Dalit movement, doing participant-observation in the movement necessarily included taking part in the ongoing debate. Throughout the fieldwork, I was constantly asked about my views on Dalit politics and requested to take a personal stand on current affairs and to participate actively in the discussions at political meetings and seminars.<sup>13</sup> Thus, I had to invest my own political viewpoints in my encounter with the activists, even though my academic ideals told me to stay impartial and balanced in relation to internal conflicts in the field. Like many other social movement scholars I, myself, had been involved in other types of social movement politics and my initial choice of the Dalit movement as a field of research was also, at least partially, politically motivated (cf. Meyer 2002: 7). Yet, I worried that stating my own political views and sympathies might alienate some informants and that I would not be able to keep the sufficient analytical distance to the empirical data that I was producing. In the beginning, I therefore often tried to answer in a reflective, academic way, when I was asked about my personal opinion in relation to politically controversial subjects. However, I soon realised that many activists promptly lost interest in me if I refused to take a clear stand. To stay included in the network of Dalit movement activists, I had to speak my mind and so I cautiously engaged in discussing Dalit politics.

In fact, political discussions turned out to be an invaluable source of knowledge, because my scepticism or downright opposition tended to sharpen the arguments of my informants, while I, myself, on the other hand, started questioning my own convictions. Through political discussions, I learned to understand and appreciate

---

<sup>12</sup> A *dharna* is an Indian type of sit-down protest, where protesters sit in front of government offices or their political adversaries' homes or offices to press for their rights or interests.

<sup>13</sup> Eva-Maria Hardtmann (2003) describes similar experiences in her study of the Dalit movement.



diametrically oppositional views and arguments about caste and identity and about what should be the political visions and strategies of the Dalit movement. As I became more familiar with the different, conflicting political views in the movement, I many times simply played the devil's advocate during interviews to better understand the viewpoints of the particular activist(s). At the end of the fieldwork, I had come to the point where I was actually no longer able to take sides, but could easily understand and appreciate various different political positions in the movement. Contrary to my expectations, my political involvement in the field thus ended up facilitating an analytical distance to the internal disagreements of the Dalit movement and made me aware of the profound strategic and emotional dilemmas related to the politicisation of Dalit identity.

The altogether eleven months fieldwork resulted in a comprehensive body of ethnographic data of which only a few bits and pieces will be presented directly in the thesis. However, the analyses and arguments are informed and supported by a much larger material.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE MAKING OF THE UNTOUCHABLES AND THE POLITICISATION OF CASTE**

The notion of ‘untouchable’ castes is today so ingrained in common and scholarly thinking about Indian society that many scholars take their unity for granted, even when discussing the contemporary splits and contradictions of the Dalit movement in different parts of India (e.g., Gorringe 2005b; Guru and Chakravarthy 2005; Hardtmann 2003). However, the idea that the lowest strata in the Hindu social hierarchy of castes constitutes a unified, coherent group of people who share the same social position, the same grievances and interests and to a large extent even the same identity, is little more than hundred years old.

The analysis of the increased political split of the Dalit movement in Karnataka sets out by exploring how the social category of ‘Untouchables’ has been constructed, politicised and institutionalised in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the overall processes of democratisation and modernisation in pre- and post-colonial India.

#### **The emergence of the Untouchables**

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Holeyas, Madigas, Mahars, Bhambis, Chaluvadis, Samagaras, Korammas, Korachas, Bhovis and numerous other low ranking castes living in the area that today constitutes the state of Karnataka did not go under a common name or think of themselves as belonging to one and the same group of people. With separate identities, occupational specialisations and ritual obligations they constituted a highly heterogeneous section of the population and did not have much else in common than their similar feudal, dependency relations with landowning patrons in addition to the fact that higher-ranking Hindu castes considered most of them to be so ritually polluting that all physical contact had to be avoided. In the course of barely seventy years, however, they were to be categorised first as ‘Outcastes’, ‘Panchamas’, ‘Depressed Classes’ and ‘Exterior Castes’, then as ‘Untouchables’ and ‘Harijans’, before finally being officially classified as ‘Scheduled Castes’ in the Government of India Act in 1935 (Charsley

1996).<sup>14</sup> Significantly, these generic names were ascribed to the economically weakest and socially lowest ranking castes in the society by civil servants, politicians and social reformers for purposes of administration and control, as well as for the social uplift and political mobilisation of the categorised (Charsley and Karanth 1998: 20). The initial formation and delineation of a common identity for the large cluster of castes today known as either Scheduled Castes or Dalits did thus not arise from within the low castes themselves; it was ascribed to them by others. As I shall argue, the formation of a collective identity of Untouchables and later Scheduled Castes and Dalits provided a strong platform for the political mobilisation of the so labelled castes in independent India, but it also deliberately ignored the differences and distinctive cultural resources of the many castes or *jatis* thrown together under these labels.

One of the single most important factors in the making of a universal Indian category of degraded and despised castes at the bottom of the social hierarchy was the decennial census of India, which was initiated by the British colonial administration in 1871-72<sup>15</sup>. From the outset the census was commissioned to rank the numerous Indian castes according to their supposed social precedence and great efforts were made to develop a uniform, all India scheme of hierarchical classification (Charsley 1996; Dirks 2002).

At the time of the first census, the term Depressed Classes was gaining ground among Indian intellectuals and social reformers, who found that something had to be done to better the situation of the lowest ranking, poor and socially deprived castes (Charsley and Karanth 1998: 21). However, it was not 'Depressed Classes', but the term 'Outcaste', which was used in the first census to designate the lowest of altogether five identified strata of the Hindu population. The census thereby adopted the ancient cosmological scheme, *varnasharma dharma*, of the pre-Hindu Vedic scriptures, which divides humankind into four hierarchically ordered *varnas*, or social categories, of respectively Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (labourers), plus sometimes an additional fifth category of Chandalas or 'outcasts' expelled from the first four categories. It was thus a religious model of Indian

---

<sup>14</sup> On scrutiny, however, Charsley and Karanth remark, the long equation of terms is far from unproblematic, since each of the terms has emerged within a particular context of use, while there is no established relationship between them. Many of the terms listed as synonyms for the same social strata do therefore in fact denote differently defined, albeit largely overlapping, groups of people (1998: 20). For this reason, the exact definition of 'Dalit' in relation to the categories of 'Untouchables' and 'Scheduled Castes' has been a recurrent theme of contestation in the Dalit movement since its inception, as it will appear in the following chapters of the thesis.

<sup>15</sup> The first census of India, which is usually referred to as the census of 1871-72, was conducted rather unsystematically in different parts of India in the period between 1867 and 1872 (GoI 2010-11). Because of its obvious flaws, this first census has never attained the same status as the subsequent decennial censuses (Dirks 2002: 200).

society that was used to classify and rank the myriad of contemporary individual castes or jatis in the subcontinent, and a model that privileged the Brahminical elite's understanding of caste as a divine hierarchy in which they themselves happened to be on top. The census' embracement of the varna scheme meant that the social institution of caste was defined as a purely religious phenomenon and an essential part of Hinduism.<sup>16</sup>

In the beginning of the 1900s, the term 'untouchable' and the related concept of untouchability crept into the language of politicians and social reformers as an alternative to the many shifting classificatory terms designating the lowest social strata among the Hindus. At a social conference in 1903 in the city of Dharwar, in what is presently northern Karnataka, the Congress leader, G. K. Gokhale rhetorically stated, '*We may touch a cat, we may touch a dog, we may touch any other animal, but the touch of these human beings is pollution*' (Gokhale 1920 in Charsley 1996: 6). It was thus the attitude of higher castes, notably Brahmins, towards the group, which from now on increasingly was referred to as 'Untouchables' that was defining for the new identity label. In the course of a decade, a number of organisations were formed in different parts of India for the social uplift of the 'Untouchables' and the question of religiously sanctioned discriminatory practices, so-called untouchability, occupied a central role for the high caste reformers engaged in the cause (Charsley 1996: 6pp). A new powerful identity category had thus been established for the uplift of a population group, who did still not themselves identify with this or with any of the other terms of the nomenclature invented for their designation.

### **Anti-Brahminism and the ethnicisation of caste**

Concurrent with the British colonial administration's efforts to map and classify castes as clearly bounded, socially ranked entities, castes from all over the country began to form caste associations to pressurise for a higher and more honourable status in the census. This development has by social scientists been defined as a process of ethnicisation or substantialisation, in which the ambiguity and fluidity of caste was replaced by sharp

---

<sup>16</sup> However, the *varna* scheme corresponded badly with the actual social stratification in most parts of the country, not least South India, where the Brahminical castes made up barely four per cent of the population and where hardly any castes could be identified as belonging to either the Kshatriya or the Vaishya category (Dirks 2002: 204). In fact, even the task of identifying singular castes on the ground proved to be a problem for the census-takers, since the localised basis of endogamous groups meant that caste names varied from place to place and that boundaries between different groups were not firmly established. What was regarded as a caste or *jati* in one place would be considered a sub-division or a clan in another place (Charsley 1996: 3). Contrary to the simplicity of the textual *varna* scheme, actual caste identities thus proved to be overlapping, unstable, and contested (Dirks 2002: 44).

boundaries and a new level of internal organisation (Jaffrelot 2000; Reddy 2005; Srinivas 2010). In other words, castes, and in particular larger, numerically dominant castes, gradually turned into self-conscious political actors that defined themselves in terms of their outer boundaries and distinctive cultural identities.<sup>17</sup>

The ethnicisation and substantialisation of caste was further spurred by the popularisation of the 'Aryan invasion theory' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that claimed that the linguistic differences between the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages in north India and the speakers of Dravidian languages in south India was the result of a mass immigration (or invasion) of Aryans about 1500 B.C., who had gradually come to dominate north India and forced the Dravidians to the south (Fosse 2000). The Aryans were believed to constitute the three upper varnas of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas described in the Vedas, while the Shudras were believed to be the indigenous Dravidian-speaking inhabitants of India who had been defeated and suppressed by the foreign Aryan invaders. While the Aryan invasion theory was originally formulated by western scholars, it was readily taken up by a number of social reformers and low caste politicians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, among them Jotirao Phule<sup>18</sup>, Periyar<sup>19</sup> and later B.R. Ambedkar<sup>20</sup>, to explain the depressed state of the low and 'untouchable' castes.

Parallel with the official interpretation of caste as a rigid status hierarchy integrating the entire Hindu population, caste was interpreted and practised as an expression of deep-seated difference and as political entities competing for power, status and privileges. The two very different interpretations – and the tension between them – have significantly shaped the politicisation of caste and untouchability up until today, not least in the Dalit movement as it will become evident from the following chapters.

---

<sup>17</sup> Caste associations played the role of interest groups in relation to the state and also served as mutual aid structures that founded schools and hostels for the caste's children and created co-operative movements (Jaffrelot 2000: 758). Moreover, caste associations often forged the unity between a number of smaller castes and sub-castes, which began to identify with a common caste name in the census and to marry across caste barriers thus creating larger caste communities with more bargaining power in relation to the state. The 'untouchable' castes, however, did generally not have the resources to form caste associations and as a group remained split and unorganised.

<sup>18</sup> Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) was an Indian social reformer and educationalist from what was then Bombay Presidency (nowadays Maharashtra), who fought for the social and economic uplift of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras (the latter was Phule's own term for the category of people that was later to become known as 'Untouchables') (cf. Deshpande 2002).

<sup>19</sup> E.V. Ramasamy 'Periyar' (1879-1973) was a Tamil nationalist social reformer and politician, who led the anti-Brahminical movement in Tamil Nadu from the 1920s and fought against north Indian dominance of South India after Independence.

<sup>20</sup> Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a U.S. and British-educated lawyer, writer and politician from the 'untouchable' Mahar caste in the Central Provinces (today's Madhya Pradesh), who from the mid-1920s strongly engaged himself in the struggle for the rights of the 'untouchable' castes and later became the law minister in the first Indian government and drafted the Indian constitution. Today B.R. Ambedkar or Babasaheb as he is affectionately called enjoys an iconic status in the Indian Dalit movement. For biographies of B.R. Ambedkar see e.g., Keer (2002) and Rodrigues (2003).

### **B.R. Ambedkar and the politicisation of ‘untouchability’**

In the decades leading up to the Indian Independence in 1947, the cause of the ‘Untouchables’ or Depressed Classes was increasingly politicised and debated and with that also the very institution of caste, which was seen as a natural part of Indian society by some and as a system of ‘graded inequality’ and a hindrance to democracy by others.

The most popular champion of the Untouchables’ rights of all times, B.R. Ambedkar, was himself torn between the two different interpretations of caste throughout his political life and between the wish to completely abolish caste and the wish to strengthen the ‘untouchable’ castes politically, economically and socially (Rodrigues 2006). On the one hand, he agitated for the abolition of untouchability and the eradication of caste (cf. Ambedkar 2003[1936]), on the other hand, he fought with the British for ‘separate electoral constituencies’ for the ‘Depressed Classes’ at the round table conferences in the 1930s and formed political parties<sup>21</sup> to mobilise the ‘untouchable’ castes jointly in parliamentary politics. Ambedkar’s political thinking and activism was thus profoundly marked by the ‘the dilemma of stigmatized identities’ (Jasper 2010), as he continuously attempted to mobilise and unite the ‘untouchable’ castes for whose sake he wanted caste to be annihilated – and thus in a sense contributed to the strengthening of caste identities, though he struggled to eradicate them.

Ambedkar’s understanding of caste as a social institution was equally muddled, as he on the one hand perceived caste as a religiously instituted hierarchy of ‘graded inequality’ and on the other hand, described the emergence of caste in India as a result of the historic clashes between invaded (Aryan) Hindus and the original, Buddhist inhabitants of India.<sup>22</sup> However, Ambedkar did never attempt to rehabilitate any original elements of the ‘untouchable’ castes’ cultural heritage. Quite the contrary, he urged people from the ‘untouchable’ castes to stop performing their traditional ‘polluting’ duties, to dress nicely, and give up the widespread habits of eating beef and drinking alcohol as a means of self-respect and dignity.

Late in his life, Ambedkar became convinced that the ‘untouchable’ castes had to pursue a separate, independent identity for themselves and that they could not be liberated without actively renouncing Hinduism. Shortly before his death in 1956,

---

<sup>21</sup> B.R. Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party in 1936, the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) in 1942, and the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956.

<sup>22</sup> According to Charsley (2010), Ambedkar understood caste as an ideology of the self-proclaimed high castes that used it as an instrument for imposing dependent inferiority on the Shudras and ‘Untouchables’. However, it was his immediate concern was to create a common culturally distinctive category of ‘Untouchables’ for whom he could fashion a common history. Ambedkar thus supported the idea of a unified ‘untouchable’ population, despite the obvious lack of homogeneity among the castes so labelled.

Ambedkar therefore converted to Buddhism at a mass ceremony in the city of Nagpur together with hundred thousands of his followers.

### **The institutionalisation of caste in independent India**

After Independence, the constitution of India made the practice of untouchability a criminal offence and identified a number of ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’ in each state that were eligible to certain privileges of positive discrimination, commonly known as ‘reservation’ in higher education, political representation, and government employment proportional to their numerical representation in the general population. Thereby, the castes and communities that had been classified as ‘tribals’<sup>23</sup> and ‘Untouchables’ in the course of the past century plus an additional number of castes that were perceived to have a comparable history of social and economic deprivation, were acknowledged to need special protection to come on par with the rest of the Indian population.<sup>24</sup>

Initially, the national reservation policies were only planned to last for ten years, but the system of reservation has been extended every ten years ever since, as the decennial census and other statistics reveal that the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes according to almost all socio-economic indicators continue to lag considerably behind the national average. In addition to the national reservation policies, the Scheduled Caste population was made the target of numerous welfare programmes e.g., vocational training, irrigation projects, and housing schemes that made the classification of Scheduled Caste attractive and created large constituencies with interests in maintaining the system. Thereby, the reservation policies contributed to the reinforcement of caste, even though they were meant to level the differences (Charsley 1996; Guru & Chakravarty 2005).

In 1990, the reservation system was further extended to the social category of ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBCs) that roughly corresponded to the Shudra category of the varna classification scheme. Now encompassing the majority of the Indian population, the national reservation policies no longer seemed as a provisional measure

---

<sup>23</sup> For a critique of the notion of ‘tribal’ communities in India see e.g., Béteille (1986) and Skaria (1997).

<sup>24</sup> Just like the earlier national census categories of ‘outcastes’, ‘depressed classes’ and ‘exterior castes’ the Scheduled Caste category was restricted to Hindus and Buddhists. Christians belonging to the ‘untouchable’ castes, so-called *Dalit Christians*, who generally suffered discrimination and social and economic marginalisation to the same extent as their Hindu caste fellows (Deliège 2001; Jacob 2002; Japhet 1987), were thus not encompassed by the reservation policies.

to rectify the wrongs of the past. Rather, reservation had become a vital part of Indian democracy where the relative representation of individual castes in education, public employment had become an important measure of social justice.

### **The Scheduled Castes in contemporary Karnataka**

Despite the obvious political strength of the umbrella categories of 'untouchable' castes and Scheduled Castes, these categories have not replaced the more complex and localised caste identities that continue to exist in rural as well as urban environments in Karnataka (Charsley & Karanth 1998). Rather, as the Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1996) has suggested, castes have become 'elastic bodies' whose actual sizes vary with the context, the groups being smaller for endogamy than for claiming political rights and reservations.

According to the census of 2001, 8.6 million people or about 16 per cent of the totally 53 million inhabitants of Karnataka belong to the Scheduled Castes (GoK 2006: 211). The large majority of the Scheduled Castes belong to the two major 'untouchable' castes of Holeyas and Madigas<sup>25</sup>, but the list of Scheduled Castes in Karnataka has no less than 101 entries many of them amalgamating two, three caste names or more, reflecting the vast heterogeneity of the Scheduled Castes in the state.<sup>26</sup>

In the early 2000s, the overall social and economic of situation of the Scheduled Castes in Karnataka was characterised by a striking combination of undeniable social progress and bleak deprivation. Compared with the situation in the beginning of the 1970s, when the Dalit movement emerged, the Scheduled Castes in the state had experienced significant progress in the areas of education, public employment, health, and democratic participation. Moreover and maybe most importantly, there had been a gradual relaxation of the practices of untouchability, simultaneous with the emergence of a new self-consciousness among particularly the younger generations of

---

<sup>25</sup> The Holeyas and the Madigas are also sometimes known by the designations *Balagai* and *Edagai*, literally meaning 'right-hand' and 'left-hand', respectively. These names refer to the bifurcation between agricultural and artisan castes, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century encompassed all castes from Brahmins to 'Untouchables' in South India (Charsley & Karanth 1998; Brimnes 1999). Today, however, only the 'untouchable' castes are divided by this bifurcation.

<sup>26</sup> About 22 per cent<sup>26</sup> of the Scheduled Caste population in Karnataka belong to the so-called 'touchable' castes that have traditionally not been considered as ritually polluting by higher castes, but nonetheless rank very low in the social hierarchy. Compared to the 'untouchable' castes, these castes have an altogether different social and cultural history and have generally not formed part of the feudal patron-client relationships that have been so characteristic of the 'untouchable' castes' situation or been assigned with specific hereditary duties by the village communities. Despite their lowliness and deprivation, the Bhovis, Lambanis, and other 'touchable' Scheduled Castes are thus having a quite different social position than the 'untouchable' castes in the state.



the Scheduled Castes, who were now less willing to tolerate discrimination or abuse tacitly. However, the Scheduled Castes in Karnataka were still lacking far behind the general population socially, educationally, and economically (cf. Charsley and Karanth 1998; GoK 2006).

Despite the overall progress, there were still many villages in the early 2000s where the ‘untouchable’ castes were subject to practices of untouchability, such as two-tumbler system at the teahouses<sup>27</sup>, not having access to common wells and not being able to sit down in the company of higher caste people. Compared to the situation thirty or forty years ago, however, the extent and degree of oppression and discrimination had considerably decreased. Many of the first generation Dalit activists, who were in their forties and fifties during my fieldwork, had themselves had to sit on the veranda outside the classroom during their primary school years and to drink water dripping from a bamboo stick, which their class mates held over their cupped hands, not being allowed to take water directly from the common water pot like the other children. At the turn of the century, such practices were unthinkable, even in the most remote villages, even though the situation differed considerably from place to place (Charsley & Karanth 1998).<sup>28</sup>

While traditional practices of untouchability were – slowly but surely – disappearing, caste-motivated violence against people from the ‘untouchable’ castes, commonly known as ‘atrocities’, were on the rise in the 2000s (Frontline 2006). One of the most gruesome incidences took place in Karnataka in 2000, when seven persons from the Holeya caste were burnt to death by the dominant castes in the village of Kambalapalli (Assadi & Rajendran 2000).<sup>29</sup> Hostilities against the ‘untouchable’ castes were thus no longer referring to the religious principles of purity and pollution, but expressed in the idiom of communalism with the upper castes attempting to retain their dominance over the ‘untouchable’ castes through intimidations and violent attacks. The relation between the upper, dominating castes and the ‘untouchable’ castes was thus gradually shifting from a predominantly hierarchical relation to a relation of communal conflict and competition.

---

<sup>27</sup> Traditionally, people from the ‘untouchable’ castes were served tea and coffee in separate glasses outside the teashops (which they were banned from entering) because of their alleged polluting nature.

<sup>28</sup> In the mid-1990s, a research team headed by the sociologists/social anthropologists Simon Charsley and G.K. Karanth carried out detailed ethnographic studies of seven rural “former untouchable” communities in Karnataka. The study showed that the overall caste structures in Karnataka vary from region to region and that the status of individual caste communities varies immensely from district to district and even from village to village (Charsley and Karanth 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Other examples of atrocities committed against Scheduled Caste communities include murders, pollution of wells, and the forcing of victims to eat human excreta as punishment or revenge for challenging traditional inhibitions on the ‘untouchable’ castes (cf. Frontline 2006).

While the hierarchical dimensions of caste were clearly on the decline in the early 2000s, the cultural dimensions of caste were still thriving. Thus, segregated habitation was still the norm in rural Karnataka, with each caste living in a separate street or parts of the villages. In many places, the 'untouchable' castes lived in separate settlements, called as *keeris* or colonies situated outside or adjacent to the main villages or *oorus*; thus physically marking the distance and difference between higher castes and lower castes.<sup>30</sup> Most places, it was highly un-common for higher castes to allow people from the 'untouchable' castes inside their houses, but also people from the 'untouchable' castes themselves did generally not socialise with each other or enter into each other's houses. Inter-caste marriages between people from different Scheduled Castes, not to mention between Scheduled Castes and other castes, were also extremely rare in the rural areas and severely discouraged by all communities. Caste thus played a major role in the regulation of social intercourse in rural Karnataka and the principle of social segregation was generally accepted by all the rural communities, including the Scheduled Castes. (Cf. Charsley & Karanth 1998).

In the urban areas, where about twenty-five per cent of the Scheduled Caste population lived according to the 2001 census, the situation was markedly different. Because of the anonymity of the urban environment, caste was usually not a factor in daily interaction between people in the streets, busses, markets, or workplaces, but was looked upon as a personal matter related to religious traditions, food choices, marriage, and family ties. Practising caste was by many urbanites considered an obsolete and uncivilised feature of the past and generally traditional forms of untouchability were not practiced in the towns and cities. When Scheduled Caste street sweepers and garbage collectors were served in separate glasses and asked to stay outside the teahouses, it was thus often explained as a measure of hygiene and not as a measure of caste segregation. Overt forms of caste-based discrimination were thus relatively rare in the urban areas, but subtle and hidden forms of discrimination were still common, causing many Scheduled Caste people to try to hide their caste identity from their neighbours, schoolmates, and colleagues.

While the majority of urban Scheduled Caste members live in poverty, the towns and cities in Karnataka are also home to the growing number of people from the Scheduled Castes, who have attained middle class status through education and

---

<sup>30</sup> The distinction between *ooru* and *keeri* is particularly typical of the southern, 'Old Mysore' part of Karnataka. In northern Karnataka, the 'untouchable' castes usually have their quarters inside the villages, underscoring that the local practices of caste are not determined by a uniform ideology or system, but are deeply embedded in the social relations of local society (Charsley and Karanth 1998).

employment secured by the national reservation policies. With an increasing number of doctors, engineers, university lecturers, police officers and government administrators hailing from the Scheduled Castes, class differences within the Scheduled Caste category have increased considerably over the past fifty years and contributed to further social differentiation among the Scheduled Castes (Jeffrey 2001). People from the Scheduled Castes are thus not only divided by cultural, regional, linguistic, and religious differences, but also by economic differences, which mean that they as a group have increasingly different political interests and priorities. Scheduled Caste identity is in other words not constitutive of a coherent political constituency, even though this is still the way that it is presented by large parts of the Dalit movement.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have described how the social category of 'Untouchables' was created as part of the political and administrative processes in which caste was established both as an ancient religious hierarchy of 'graded in-equality' based on the ritual opposition of purity and pollution and as the expression of essential ethno-cultural differences reaching back to the Aryan invasion 1500 B.C. In the course of a century, caste was thus rigidly ordered and reified as a universal Indian system of unambiguous, endogamous groups, which could be neatly classified into larger major categories of which the 'Untouchables' or Scheduled Castes was the hierarchically lowest. The category of 'Untouchables' or Scheduled Castes thus attained the status of an all-India class of oppressed people with few other characteristics than their degraded status.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DALIT STRUGGLE IN KARNATAKA AND THE CHANGING DISCOURSES OF INDIAN POLITICS**

‘The 1960s and 70s was the age of Dalits and Shudras. Even Nehru and Indira Gandhi were socialists. Now for the past ten years, the Hindutva wave is sweeping this country and the Dalit movement is neither dead nor alive.’

Siddaraju, bank officer, activist in the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti in the 1980s and 1990s

‘The awareness of the Dalits is the greatest achievement of the DSS. Everybody, whether he is educated or uneducated, whether he is a landless labourer, or whatever he may be, they have got that awareness.’

Indudhara Honnapura writer and journalist, co-founder of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti

This chapter recounts the history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka from its emergence in the early-mid 1970s up until the early 2000s and examines how the identity of Dalit has been interpreted and negotiated in relation to the changing and still more differentiated and contradictory political agendas of the movement.

#### **From redistribution to recognition?**

Writing on the overall history and development of the Dalit movement in India, the political scientists Gopal Guru and Anuradha Chakravarty (2005) argue that the priorities of the Dalit movement have gradually changed from the 1970s to the 2000s with issues of class and poverty being increasingly downplayed and replaced by what they term as a politics of identity formation. Guru and Chakravarty consider this development detrimental to the interests of the vast deprived and impoverished majority of the Scheduled Castes for whom the issue of economic security is the most pressing political concern and advocate for a renewed focus on poverty alleviation.

The change of political priorities is not unique to the Dalit movement, but has taken place in a number of social movements of stigmatised groups in different parts of the world in the course of the 1990s as dominant political discourses have increasingly

turned from framing social conflicts as struggles of class to framing them as conflicts over cultural identity (Fraser 1995, 2000).<sup>31</sup> The American political philosopher, Nancy Fraser, thus speaks of a general shift from a politics of redistribution to a politics of recognition in the wake of the downfall of state communism in Eastern Europe and the acceleration of economic globalisation (Fraser 1995).

As this chapter will show, the case of the Dalit movement in Karnataka on the whole supports Guru and Chakravarty's argument about issues of class and economic development having increasingly lost their significance in Dalit politics. However, the study also indicates that the suggested dichotomy between economic politics and identity politics is oversimplified and even misleading as it reduces politics of identity to a question of cultural recognition and deliberately ignores the identity aspect of anti-caste struggle. In contrast, I shall argue that the contemporary dilemmas associated with politicising Dalit identity have actually made themselves felt right since the beginning of the movement, though they have gradually intensified and crystallised in response to the wider, comprehensive changes of national and state politics during the late 1980s and 1990s.

### **The Bhim Sena: A separatist vision for the Dalits**

Arguably, the Dalit movement in Karnataka (even in all of India) set off in 1968 with the launch of the militant, separatist organisation *Bhim Sena* in Gulbarga district in North Karnataka (Omvedt 1994: 336; Shetty 1978).<sup>32</sup> This organisation was founded by B. Shyam Sunder (1908-1975), a Scheduled Caste leader, writer and politician, who had been involved in the struggle for the rights of the Scheduled Castes since the early 1940s. The name Bhim Sena literally meaning 'Bhim's Army' referred to B.R. Ambedkar's first name Bhimrao and indicated a strong adherence to Ambedkar's philosophy. Bhim Sena was launched to confront the increasing number of upper caste assaults on Scheduled Caste communities militarily, and thousands of young men in the northern districts of Karnataka and the adjacent districts in the neighbouring states of Maharashtra and

---

<sup>31</sup> A parallel example is the movement of peasants and indigenous people in Guatemala, which in the course of the 1990s gradually shifted its focus from land struggles, economic redistribution, and human rights to issues of identity and recognition and turned into a pure Maya movement, which increasingly focused on retrieving long since forgotten indigenous traditions and resuscitating the 'original' Maya religion of their ancestors. [My own experience from 'solidarity work' in Nicaragua and Guatemala in the 1990s and 2000s.]

<sup>32</sup> Most scholars and activists do, however, regard the Bhoosa incident in 1973, described below, as the starting signal of the Dalit movement in Karnataka (e.g., Japhet 1997).

Andhra Pradesh were trained in self-defence by former military servicemen (Shetty 1978:19).<sup>33</sup>

The struggle of Bhim Sena against the continued oppression of the 'untouchable' castes was, as indicated by the name, construed as a veritable war between the Scheduled Castes and the so-called caste Hindus, i.e. Hindus belonging to any of the four varnas of the Vedic scriptures. Shyam Sunder held that the Scheduled Castes were *mool bharathis*, 'original Indians', and the rulers of the country before the advent of the Aryan invaders and that the Scheduled Castes were entirely different from 'caste Hindus' (Sunder 1965, cited in Shetty 1978:2). Sunder thus bought into the anti-Brahmin, 'ethnic' discourse on caste describing the 'untouchable' castes as the indigenous Indian inhabitants. Like Ambedkar<sup>34</sup>, Sunder demanded separate settlements, a 'Dalitstan' for the Scheduled Castes, and proposed that twenty-five per cent of the villages in every *taluk*<sup>35</sup> was handed over to the Scheduled Castes and the 'caste Hindus' relocated in other villages and compensated for their losses (ibid.13 pp). Further Sunder demanded separate electorates and universities for the Scheduled Castes in each of the Indian states. Bhim Sena was thus rooted in a separatist vision of liberation. Freedom for the Scheduled Castes was literally interpreted as freedom from the 'caste Hindus'; social and cultural autonomy from the upper castes and the religious ideology of Hinduism being the sine qua non for liberation of the Scheduled Castes.

While the Dalit organisations formed few years later were inspired by Marxist class analysis and ultimately aimed at eradicating the very institution of caste, the aim of Bhim Sena was essentially to protect the Scheduled Castes and strike back whenever they were attacked, not to profoundly revolutionise the whole society or abolish the institution of caste. However, the struggle of Bhim Sena was short-lived. The organisation disintegrated soon after the death of Shyam Sunder in 1975 and today the experience of Bhim Sena is almost forgotten by Dalit activists and scholars. Significantly, I never encountered anybody during my research who had participated in the organisation, though a few Dalit leaders referred appraisingly to Shyam Sunder as

---

<sup>33</sup> Bhim Sena generally spoke on behalf of the entire group of 'untouchable' castes. However, it is not clear to me, if Bhim Sena in reality reached out to all young men from the 'untouchable' castes or if it only mobilised participants from a single caste. (Shyam Sunder himself belonged to the Telugu right hand caste of Malas often identified with Holeyas in Karnataka).

<sup>34</sup> B.R. Ambedkar demanded separate settlements for the 'untouchable' castes on several occasions, for instance in the essay 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' from 1945 (Ambedkar 2008: 343 pp.). However, Ambedkar was not consistent in his statements on this subject and on other occasions urged people from the 'untouchable' castes to escape stigmatisation by moving from the villages to the anonymity of the towns and cities. In all occasions, Ambedkar maintained that the ultimate aim of his political struggle was a complete eradication of caste (Rodrigues 2003).

<sup>35</sup> A taluk is an administrative unit, smaller than a district and larger than a hubli.

‘very militant’. When Bhim Sena is still worth mentioning it is because it shows that essentialist and separatist tendencies have actually been influencing the Dalit movement since its start, though it is often thought of as a recent phenomenon by scholars and activists alike.

### **The ‘bhoosa incident’ and the emergence of a revolutionary Dalit movement**

It was a completely different ideology that characterised the movement which later came to be known nationally and internationally as the broad-based, progressive Dalit movement of Karnataka. This movement started out primarily as a literary protest movement of revolutionary, young writers, but within few years developed into a mass-movement engaged in land struggles, awareness building, protests against discrimination and atrocities, and anti-communalist agitation.

The starting signal for this new movement was by most of the original Dalit activists considered to be the so-called bhoosa incident in 1973, when the Congress state minister of municipal administration, B. Basavalingappa, in a public speech declared that Kannada literature was nothing but *bhoosa* or ‘cattle-feed’.<sup>36</sup> Basavalingappa, who himself belonged to the Holeya caste, criticised Kannada literature for reflecting only the aesthetics and experiences of the Brahmins and upper castes in its habitual praise of Gods and nature, leaving out the voices of the downtrodden, toiling majority, especially the ‘untouchables’ (cf. Shetty 1978). The speech caused a major political crisis in Karnataka with widespread and violent protests throughout the state. Upper caste youth attacked the hostels of Scheduled Caste students and it came to regular clashes and street fighting between protesting groups of upper caste youth and Scheduled Caste students, who for their part supported Basavalingappa. The crisis caused the forced resignation of the state minister, but also ignited the revolutionary spirit among the Scheduled Caste youth.<sup>37</sup>

At that time, a new political consciousness was already breeding in the Scheduled Caste communities with young people getting better educated than the previous generation (of which the large majority was illiterate and completely

---

<sup>36</sup> My representation of the Dalit movement’s early history is mainly based on interviews with a number of the first generation activists and leaders, including S. Siddalingaiah, Devanoor Mahadev, Indudhara Honnapura, and O. Rajanna, who were all elected convenors of DSS in the first foundation conference in 1977. For other descriptions and analyses of the early history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka, see Japhet (1997), Rodrigues (2010) and Shetty (1978).

<sup>37</sup> B. Basavalingappa was a controversial and provocative political figure, who had many times expressed his contempt for upper caste culture and Hindu religion. The ‘bhoosa incident’ was the last straw, which forced the Congress chief minister, Devaraj Urs, to dismiss him from office (Shetty 1978).

uneducated) and being less willing to accept their deprived and depressed status as the will of fate. Many villages and urban slums had local Ambedkar *sanghas* and Ambedkar youth organisations (usually single caste enterprises) demonstrating resistance to upper caste domination and engaging in local conflicts affecting the Scheduled Castes. In Bangalore, an organisation of ‘rationalist students’ mobilised Scheduled Caste college students in the thousands for protest marches and in the industrial town of Bhadravati in central Karnataka, a college headmaster, B. Krishnappa, was organising the Scheduled Caste workers on the local steel factory against discrimination in the workplace. In southern Karnataka, the socialist movement and particularly the youth organisation ‘Samajwadi Yuvajana Sabha’(SYS) attracted many progressive, young students, writers and intellectuals, among them some of the young Scheduled Caste men who were to become prominent figures in the first generation of Dalit movement leaders and renowned cultural personalities<sup>38</sup>. Many of them wrote prose and poetry inspired by the already flourishing Maharashtrian Dalit literature and by the revolutionary and militant Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra which had popularised the term ‘Dalit’ as a defiant and self-conscious alternative to the popular Gandhian euphemism *Harijan* ‘people of God’ that they believed was patronising (cf. Zelliot 2001). The young socialist, ‘Dalit writers’ organised meetings and seminars on the condition of the Scheduled Castes in Karnataka and published an independent magazine ‘Panchama’ on the Scheduled Castes’ experience of caste, culture and oppression.

The basis of all these activities was a radical egalitarian, socialist and rationalist (i.e., anti-Hindu) outlook and a strong opposition to the institution of caste. Tellingly, the new Dalit activists did generally not even know each other’s castes and all had a markedly anti-communitarian perspective on anti-caste struggle. They were inspired by the writings of Karl Marx and by the Indian socialist Rammanohar Lohia<sup>39</sup>, while the writings of B.R. Ambedkar played a less significant role. They used the new term ‘Dalit’ in a distinctly non-essentialist way to refer to all those suffering under the combined forces of caste and class and to stress the downtrodden, oppressed state of all the poor and marginalised. The ‘bhoosa incident’, however, marked a decisive turning

---

<sup>38</sup> Among them the author and winner of the Sahitya Academy award in Kannada Devanoor Mahadeva, poet and former dean at Bangalore University S. Siddalingaiah, writer and journalist Indudhara Honnapura and poet and lecturer H. Govindaiah.

<sup>39</sup> Contrary to other Indian socialist thinkers, Rammanohar Lohia (1910-1967) paid direct attention to caste, which he considered a congealed form of class that excluded 80 per cent of the Indian population (including religious minorities) from public life. Lohia advocated a broad political alliance between Scheduled Castes, Shudras, Muslims and Christians against Brahmin and upper caste dominance and was a strong proponent of inter-caste marriages as a long-term solution to the problem of caste. Compared to the revolutionary ideology of Marxism, ‘Lohianism’ was reformist and believed that changes could be made within the existing system (Gowda 2010; Omvedt 1994; Srinivas & Panini 1984).



point for the young, Scheduled Caste writers and activists since most of the upper caste members<sup>40</sup> of the socialist movement sided unambiguously with their caste fellows in demanding the resignation of B. Basavalingappa. After all, even progressive, egalitarian socialists, who were proclaimed opponents of caste, could not tolerate a direct attack on their cultural heritage in the name of anti-caste struggle. The 'bhoosa incident' thus made it clear that the chasm between young 'Dalit' and upper caste socialists was too wide to bridge and that the Scheduled Castes had to organise separately to emancipate themselves from upper caste domination. The universalist, socialist ideals of solidarity and common identity between all subordinated groups thus proved unable to stand the test of practice.

In the course of the following years, an independent Dalit movement gradually formed in Karnataka with the young socialist, Dalit writers and activists as some of the prime movers. In 1975, the *Dalita Lekaka Kalavida Yuva Sanghatane*, 'Young Dalit Writers and Artists Federation', was formed at a conference in the town of Bhadravathi in central Karnataka with the presence of several hundred participants: SC students, teachers, peasants, labourers and other interested. At the conference itself, it was decided that it was necessary to form a single, state-level Dalit organisation to bring together the many disparate Dalit groups<sup>41</sup> and promote a broad-based, united struggle to secure the cultural, social and economic rights of the Scheduled Castes.

### **The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti**

In 1977, the first foundational conference of the new organisation 'Dalit Sangharsh Samiti' (DSS), the Dalit Struggle Committee, was held and from now on the Dalit movement in Karnataka gained momentum (cf. Japhet 1997). The leaders of the DSS began to tour all over the state, visiting SC communities in all villages and small towns to build political awareness and establish local DSS groups. The leaders were usually staying in the local SC/ST boys' hostels where Scheduled Caste students were provided free accommodation along with educational scholarships according to the government reservation policy for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Through these encounters, students were mobilised to the movement and many of them took up responsibilities as local leaders or student leaders. In the course of few years, DSS

---

<sup>40</sup> A number of prominent, upper caste members of the socialist movement who were later to become renown literary and political personalities, however, supported their SC comrades, among them: writer and journalist P. Lankesh; author U. Ananthamurthy; the later farmers movement leader M.D. Nanjundaswamy, and writer and scholar D.R. Nagaraj.

<sup>41</sup> By 1975, a number of small Dalit groups and organisations had emerged, including Dalit Okkoota Samiti, Dalit Kriya Vedike, Dalit Kriya Samiti, Dalit Action Committee, Dalit Sangharsha Samiti, and Dalit Vidhyarthi Okkoota (Japhet 1997; Rodrigues 2010).

succeeded in organising Scheduled Caste communities from even the remotest parts of Karnataka and the Dalit movement became a political force which together with the equally strong farmer's movement 'Raitha Sangha'<sup>42</sup> came to constitute the effective opposition to the alternating Congress and Janata state governments throughout the 1980s (cf. Rodrigues 2010).

The DSS took up cases of atrocities committed against SCs mainly in the villages and raised protests against the continued practice of bonded labour and against nude worship: a yearly Hindu celebration of the goddess Yellamma in which mostly SC women were parading naked as part of the ritual.<sup>43</sup> However, it was the issue of land that dominated the Dalit struggle. The DSS raised a large number of land struggles organising landless SC communities to demand land from the government and supporting people who were evicted from the land they lived in and cultivated (often excess land) or had their land (often government grants) encroached by upper caste landlords. The methods of struggle were militant and in many cases included sudden occupation (and later cultivation) of disputed areas, hunger strikes and roadblocks. Throughout the 1980s, the main focus of the DSS remained linked to the issue of land, thus underscoring the importance that the organisation and the majority of the SCs attributed to the issues of social inequality and economic change.<sup>44</sup>

The 1980s were indeed the heydays of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. The DSS was capable of gathering several hundred thousand protesters for its demonstrations in Bangalore and was considered a political force to reckon with by politicians and by the government authorities. Accordingly, the picture of Ambedkar was installed in government offices next to that of Gandhi, a statue of Ambedkar erected in front of the state parliament, Vidhana Soudha, and the birthday of Ambedkar, *Ambedkar Jayanthi*, was declared a government holiday.

While the DSS came into being as part of a radical anti-caste movement, the concrete struggle of the organisation aimed at securing the rights and livelihoods of the

---

<sup>42</sup> For an account of the history and politics of Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), see e.g., Assadi (1997).

<sup>43</sup> The DSS succeeded in putting a stop to the yearly, naked parades of SC women, which were seen as humiliating and abusive. While many old-time Dalit activists pointed out the stop of nude worship as one of DSS's greatest successes, the Canadian anthropologist Linda Epp (2003) argues that DSS's attitude towards Dalit women parading naked actually represented a powerful masculine, middleclass discourse, which was completely insensitive towards local meanings. In that respect the DSS conformed to a typical urban, middleclass, upper caste sexual morality, which it tried to impose on poor, rural women. While this discussion falls beyond the scope of the present thesis, I will, however, in Chapter 5, describe how new Dalit organisations today confront the middleclass norms and expectations, which they claim that the DSS represents.

<sup>44</sup> On the whole, however, the land reforms in Karnataka did not profoundly change the landowner pattern in the state, which continues to be skewed, particularly in the northern part of the state (Deshpande & Torgal 2003).

Scheduled Castes and it directly contributed to elucidate the social and economic conflicts between the Scheduled Castes and the higher-ranking land owning castes. Despite its declared aim of facilitating the abolition of caste, the DSS in practice contributed to the strengthening of the collective identity of the Dalits and of the overall social and political importance of caste. ‘The dilemma of stigmatized identities’ (Jasper 2010) that I introduced in the introduction thus made itself felt in the Dalit movement right from the start, though it was not much discussed at this stage. In fact, the political strategies followed by the DSS were never thoroughly consistent. At one point for instance, Rodrigues (2010) points out, the DSS actually supported a politics of separate settlement for the Dalits<sup>45</sup> and at another point B. Krishnappa, the charismatic, first state convenor of the DSS, should even have argued for an armed Dalit struggle. The issue of identity and the implicit distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ inherent to the Dalit struggle thus gave rise to some ambiguity, even though the DSS on the whole represented a non-separatist political approach to Dalit liberation.

Issues of culture and identity played an important role in DSS’s agitation as the leaders believed that real social change could only take place through profound cultural transformation. The DSS promoted street plays, songs and poetry by the growing number of Dalit writers and contributed to the creation of a new independent, Dalit artistic style in literature and performing arts that gave voice to the experiences of the Scheduled Castes and challenged the moral and aesthetic values of Brahmins and upper castes (cf. Nagaraj 1993, 1994; Siddalingaiah 2002). The DSS also promoted traditional drumming of the *thamate* – a flat circular drum made of wood and goat or buffalo hide – as a part of their agitation. Playing the *thamate* is one of the traditional, hereditary village occupations of men from the Holeyas and Madiga castes and is regarded as a most degrading and ritually polluting activity. While the Holeyas and Madigas in the villages increasingly refused to play the *thamate* for festivals and funeral processions to protest against the traditional imposition of polluting duties, the DSS, however, moved drum playing from the streets to the stage and promoted *thamate* playing as a traditional Dalit art form. Through an inversion of meanings DSS thus used cultural traditions to restore the self-respect of the SCs and convert shame and humiliation into to cultural pride. Caste identity and traditions were thus not only interpreted as a source of oppression and stigmatisation, but also as a cultural resource to be cherished and developed.

In 1984, the DSS adopted a formal constitution and in some sense turned from a loosely structured grassroots movement into a formal organisation with rules to abide and a symbol of its own. It was decided democratically that a broom and a pickaxe put

---

<sup>45</sup> Personally, however, I have not come across that information during my fieldwork and I have not been able to find any literary sources that confirm this information, either.

across as in the communist symbol 'hammer and sickle' should serve as the logo of the organisation. This way caste and class were projected as related if not conflating structures since the broom and pickaxe were considered symbols of the 'untouchable' castes who have traditionally served as sweepers and agricultural labourers in the village societies. The symbol was intended to convey a sense of pride and self-respect. Still, some of the DSS members believed that this choice of symbol was entirely wrong. They found that the organisation should rather choose a more progressive symbol that did not deliberately depict Dalit identity as bound up with the menial and despised jobs they had been forced to do by the upper castes. In retrospect, this disagreement may be interpreted as a first indication of a burgeoning schism between political demands for personal emancipation and cultural recognition as it exposed that the DSS members had fundamentally different approaches to the representation of Dalit identity.

Ideologically, the DSS continued to be inspired by the writings of Marx and Lohia, but gradually the writings of Ambedkar gained more influence on the organisation's ideology and practice, which led to an increased focus on issues of e.g., personal freedom, fundamental rights and equal citizenship. In that way, DSS combined a socialist claim for economic redistribution with a liberal claim for civil rights and personal emancipation. The DSS held that a transformation of the society had to come from below and strongly believed in the power of grassroots mobilisation while it shunned parliamentary politics. The manifesto of DSS was decidedly leftist and placed the question of caste exploitation and discrimination in a socialist framework (Rodrigues 2010).<sup>46</sup> In practice, the DSS managed to bridge both class and caste barriers within the movement. While the organisation was led by college and university students and educated middleclass men, it was mainly concerned with the problems and grievances of the rural poor. The great majority of activists and followers of the DSS belonged to the Holeyas and Madigas, respectively – and among them the Holeyas by far outnumbered the Madigas. Still, the DSS in many districts took up cases of all the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

---

<sup>46</sup> I have not had the opportunity to read the DSS manifesto, but according to an old-time Dalit leader it was a 'left manifesto' that spoke of 'labour unions and class struggle' while maintaining that caste was the main oppressive factor for the Scheduled Castes. This information is supported by Rodrigues (2010) and Japhet (1997).

## **The ‘identity turn’ of Indian politics and the fragmentation of the Dalit movement**

In the late 1980s, the political environment in India began to change. The so-called Mandal-masjid controversies over the implementation of reservations for OBCs in higher education and public sector employment and over the communal right to the site of the abandoned north Indian mosque, Babri Masjid, which is also the alleged birth place of the Hindu god Ram, put caste and religious identity high on the political agenda. The political influence of the rightist Hindu nationalist movement grew rapidly and the parliamentary wing of the movement, the ‘Bharatiya Janata Party’ (BJP), the Indian People’s Party, became the primary opposition party in the national parliament. In fact, identity was increasingly used to build electoral constituencies and all over the country political parties proclaiming the interests of distinct identity groups, whether religious, regional, linguistic or caste-wise, mushroomed.

In addition to the thorough communalisation of Indian politics in the 1990s, the period was marked by a radical change of the economic structure in the country with the shift from a state-driven ‘planned’ economy to a thoroughly market-driven economy. The new economic policies of economic liberalisation and privatisation adopted by the Congress government in 1991 considerably reduced the role of the state and paved the road for the later extraordinary high growth rates of the national economy and the widening gap between the growing urban middle classes and the rural and urban poor. Since the state now increasingly concentrated on servicing private companies and facilitating economic growth in the private sector, the Dalit movement could no longer direct its demand for livelihood and economic development towards the state (Rodrigues 2010).

It is these two parallel developments in Indian politics: the increasing impacts of religious nationalism and of economic liberalisation that according to Guru and Chakravarty (2005) have led to an overall increased focus on identity formation in the Dalit movement and a decreased focus on poverty alleviation and social justice. If we accept this analysis, it was as a response to this new political situation that the Dalit movement in Karnataka gradually began to change its political priorities. The previous demands for inclusion of the Dalits into the mainstream of society had lost their liberating potential in the light of the openly communalist agenda of the Hindu nationalist movement. As a result, the notion of a distinct Dalit identity and culture was gaining ground among the Dalit movement activists and demands for cultural recognition started to overshadow the demands for personal emancipation and economic development (see Reddy 2005; Guru and Chakravarty 2005).

In the middle of the 1980s, the radical left wing of the DSS had left the organisation to focus more specifically on class struggle and with the ‘identity turn’ of Dalit politics in the 1990s a number of other splinter groups left the organisation to mobilise on an alternative basis; among them Christian Dalits, who had never been fully accepted as ‘real’ Dalits in the DSS. By the beginning of the 1990s, the DSS was marked by exhaustion. In Karnataka, the yearlong celebration of B.R. Ambedkar’s hundred years centenary in 1991 marked the conclusion of the DSS’s success, as this was the last time that the organisation managed to mobilise the large Dalit masses for demonstrations in Bangalore. Over the years, the militancy of the DSS had declined. The land struggles had stopped (see Rodrigues 2010) and the DSS had gradually turned into a kind of interest organisation that reacted to instances of encroachment, discrimination and atrocities against SCs and propagated for the installation of Ambedkar portraits and statues in public places to symbolically mark their presence in society. However, the DSS was no longer capable of setting its own political agenda. The following years, the process of fragmentation and political diversification escalated and brought fundamental internal disagreements to the fore, which were to profoundly change the Dalit movement in the state.

Before the state elections in 1994, a branch of the national party, the ‘Bahujan Samaj Party’ (BSP), was started in Karnataka and after heated discussions the DSS decided to support the BSP in the upcoming state elections. BSP’s ideology of capturing parliamentary power for the class of *Bahujan Samaj* (the great majority), however, differed considerably from the principles of the DSS.<sup>47</sup> Firstly, the category of Bahujan Samaj was perceived to encompass all but the 10-15 per cent so-called ‘twice-born’ castes<sup>48</sup>, including the land owning agricultural castes, and thus included those castes that were usually perceived as upper castes by the DSS. Secondly, the aim of the BSP was solely to strengthen the position of the suppressed castes, not to radically abolish the institution of caste or to change the structures of society profoundly. When the BSP joined hands with the BJP to form a coalition government in Uttar Pradesh in 1995, it came to a deep split in the DSS between the leaders who wanted to continue the support

---

<sup>47</sup> The BSP was formed in the state of Uttar Pradesh in 1984 by the charismatic leader, Kanshi Ram, who wanted to continue B.R. Ambedkar’s struggle for empowerment and political unification of the ‘untouchable’ castes. The BSP did thus not emanate from the popular Dalit movement (Pai 2001: 269), but reflected Kanshi Ram’s personal interpretation of the writings and speeches of Ambedkar. Defining the Brahminical castes as the main enemies of the Dalits (ibid. 271), the ideology of the party differed from that of the original Dalit movement in that it defined all non-twice born castes – and even the Christian and Muslim minorities – as oppressed under the Brahmins’ political hegemony. The BSP thus wanted to forge a political alliance between the Scheduled Castes and their immediate oppressors and competitors, the dominant Shudra castes, in Karnataka particularly the Vokkaligas and Lingaiyats.

<sup>48</sup> The term ‘twice-born castes’ denotes castes that are supposed to belong to the three upper varnas in the ancient varna scheme: Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishiyas.

of the BSP and those who blatantly refused future collaboration. According to the last mentioned group, the BSP completely betrayed the fundamental principles of the Dalit movement for the sake of power and engaged in a political 'number play' that replaced ideological conviction with demography and political opportunism. In 1996, accordingly the DSS split into two parts over the BSP issue. The organisation's office in Bangalore city was closed and a court case filed.<sup>49</sup>

In the course of the following years, the DSS suffered several additional splits and the growing number of different factions all continued to use the name DSS and speak in the name of the whole organisation.<sup>50</sup> All the factions taken together, the DSS was still by far the largest and most ramified Dalit organisation in the state, but it was no longer able to set a unifying agenda for the Dalit movement.

### **New political actors, agendas and identities**

While the now highly fragmented DSS had lost its former position as the principal political representative of the Scheduled Castes and the BSP struggled to form a broader constituency of Bahujans, a number of new often locally confined Dalit organisations, many of them professional NGOs, emerged in the late 1990s. Contrary to the DSS and the BSP, the new Dalit organisations were typically not based on any particular ideology or promoting a coherent vision for the Indian society, but gave priority to the development of local Dalit communities and issues of culture, identity and gender. In other words, the Dalit organisations emerging in the 1990s were generally far more inwardly oriented than the DSS and other Dalit organisations of the 1970s and 1980s. The identity of Dalit was now increasingly defined in positive terms as representing an independent cultural heritage and a morally superior way of life that deserved recognition and protection. Even the institution of caste that the Dalit movement for the past two decades had challenged and agitated against was now no longer condemned by all parts of the Dalit movement, but in fact declared as a natural component of Indian society and culture by an increasing number of activists and organisations.

However, the overall development of the Dalit movement also meant that the identity of Dalit was losing its position as a central and uniting rallying point for the

---

<sup>49</sup> The case was still pending during my fieldwork in 2002/3 and accordingly none of the DSS factions had a regular office or meeting place.

<sup>50</sup> The different DSS factions were invariably identified with their respective leaders and were thus known in the Dalit movement as the 'D.G. Sagar faction', 'C.M. Muniappa faction', 'Shivanna faction' and 'Mavalli Shankar faction' to mention the largest DSS groups. The latter, however, styled itself as 'DSS Ambedkar Wada', alluding to being particularly faithful to the teachings of B.R. Ambedkar.

many disparate groupings within the movement. With the BSP propagating the much broader identity of Bahujan and groupings of Buddhist converts and Christians, on the other hand, propagating the much narrower identities of , respectively, Buddhist and Dalit Christian as part of their agitation it became increasingly clear that the identity of Dalit was just one among many possible, and partially overlapping, political identities available to people from the Scheduled Castes in the struggle against caste-based discrimination and exploitation.

With the formation of the organisation ‘Madiga Reservation Horata Samiti’ (MRHS) around the turn of the century, the fragility of the political identity of Dalit was further accentuated, since the MRHS struggled to achieve separate quotas for the Madiga caste within the general reservation quotas for the Scheduled Castes in education and public employment.<sup>51</sup> The MRHS claimed that the Madigas as a group received a disproportionately small share of the total reservation quota for the Scheduled Castes compared with the Holeyas and other Scheduled Castes. In organising members of the Madiga caste separately, however, the MRHS broke the principle of organising the Scheduled Castes collectively which had prevailed in the Dalit movement in Karnataka since its emergence in the mid-1970s. The agitation of the MRHS upset many old-time DSS activists who believed that the political unity of the Scheduled Castes was one of the most important achievements of the movement. Others – particularly Madigas – however, claimed that there was no inherent conflict between the Madigas’ struggle for a fair share of the reservation quotas and the overall joined struggle of the Dalit movement against discrimination and exploitation.

The MRHS was probably the most talked about grassroots organisation internally in the Dalit movement during the eleven months of my fieldwork despite the fact that the MRHS held remarkably few public manifestations during this period compared to any of the other Dalit organisations that I knew of in the Bangalore area.<sup>52</sup> It was thus not the actual political activities of the MRHS –or even the demand of a more equal division of reservation opportunities – that upset so many DSS activists. Rather it was the political implications of MRHS’s struggle, which pointed out that the Scheduled

---

<sup>51</sup>The MRHS was inspired by the struggle of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS), which since the 1990s has fought for a separate reservation quota for the Madiga caste in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>52</sup> I actually never succeeded in meeting the leader of the MRHS, Keshav Murthy, despite phone contact, or any other leading figures of the organisation – and I missed the only large demonstration of the MRHS in 2003. However, I did speak to a number of different activists, from the DSS as well as other organisations who had been involved in the activities of the MRHS.



Castes did not always have coincident political interests that were thought to be disturbing.<sup>53</sup>

### Summary

In recounting the history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka, I have shown how the movement has gradually changed from being a predominantly leftist outfit with a strong anti-caste agenda in the 1970s and early 1980s into a multifaceted, heterogeneous political field that in the early 2000s increasingly incorporated groups and organisations struggling primarily for cultural recognition and parliamentary power.

The increased demands for cultural recognition and parliamentary representation in the 1990s and 2000s may, as Guru and Chakravarty (2005) and Rodrigues (2010) propose, be interpreted as a reaction to the unredeemed promises of widespread social welfare and economic development of the modern Indian democracy and as an adjustment to the new political situation in the state, in which issues of culture, religion and identity have gained centre stage. While the present study on the whole supports this analysis, it also shows that the dominant anti-caste agenda of the Dalit movement already in the 1970s and 1980s was continuously challenged by efforts to celebrate and revalue Dalit culture.

If we include the short-lived experience of Bhim Sena in the history of the Dalit movement, it moreover becomes clear that even the separatist stance that an increasing number of Dalit organisations and activists today advocate is far from a new tendency. It is therefore my argument that the dilemmas pertaining to contemporary Dalit politics – and the schisms they cause – have actually made themselves felt right since the emergence of the Dalit movement, albeit to a lesser extent than today. The politicisation of Dalit identity has thus always constituted a genuine dilemma to the Dalit movement that has balanced between representing Dalits as the downtrodden, stigmatised victims of caste oppression and as bearers of a rich and morally superior cultural tradition.

---

<sup>53</sup> In addition to the MRHS a number of other smaller Madiga organisations like ‘Madiga Dandora’ had emerged in Karnataka in the early 2000s with the aim of celebrating Madiga identity and culture, which often took the form of hour-long thamate drum sessions.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMAGINING LIBERATION: PERSONAL EMANCIPATION OR CULTURAL RECOGNITION?

‘Certainly, I am a Dalit. ....eh.., well.., I do not always feel that I am a Dalit. I am a human being, basically. I want to be a human being. I never wanted to be a Dalit. I was forced to be a Dalit. I never contested to become a Dalit, it is not an appointment, but society pointed out “*you are a Dalit*”. So now I am struggling to overcome, I am struggling to become a human being.’

Siddalingaiah, writer, poet, and folklorist, co-founder of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS)

‘The Aryan invaders created the first divide and rule system in the world. Those who escaped became tribals; those who protested became the so-called Dalits, the original inhabitants. Our people lost land and crown. They made us beggars – Untouchables. We lost our place. In our own land, we became landless. In our own kingdom, we became Untouchables.’

B. Gopal, president of the Karnataka unit of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

‘Our people are thinkers and fighters, not ‘broken people’ that is a concept taken from Ambedkar. I am not ‘broken’, I am not poor. Economic difference is there, that is materially correct, but in this village, the poor are very rich. If you first accept that you are poor, it is very difficult to change your mind.’

Chenappa, activist in the Dalit mattu Mahila Chaluvali (DMC)

In this chapter, I will examine how differently leaders and activists in the Dalit movement interpreted Dalit identity in order to understand the overall conceptions of oppression and liberation that characterised some of the different Dalit groups and organisations in Karnataka 2002/2003. For why is it that the identity of Dalit for some activists constituted a negative, stigmatised label that must be destroyed along with the entire institution of caste, while it for other activists constituted a wealth of cultural heritage and a step stone for social advancement and liberation?

## Representing Dalit identity

In the summer 2003, I often heard young activists from a number of different new Dalit organisations discuss the possibility of preparing and serving beef *biryani* – a rice speciality usually prepared with chicken or mutton for festive occasions – in the central public park of Bangalore. This proposed action would mimic one of the famous DSS actions from the mid-1980s when activists went to the streets carrying water pots to distribute drinking water to the passers-by (Yadav 1998).

Both the action of water distribution and the proposed action of serving beef biryani implicitly referred to the stigmatisation of the ‘untouchable’ castes, but even though the two actions may appear to be rather similar, the messages conveyed by them would be entirely different. Water and beef are both ‘substances’ that are intimately connected to the symbolic representation of Dalit identity. Water, because it is considered highly susceptible for ritual pollution in the Hindu cosmology. On this pretext, people from ‘untouchable’ castes have been prevented from using the wells of the upper castes and drinking water from the common pot in the school class. Beef, because it is a commonly relished food among a number of ‘untouchable’ communities that contrary to the caste Hindus do not consider cows to be sacred. Moreover, eating beef is associated with extreme oppression since people from the ‘untouchable’ castes have often been forced to eat the carrions of the upper castes’ cattle out of sheer hunger.

The water distribution by the DSS publicly tested people’s mindsets: whether they would take water from a Dalit or not, that is: whether they would treat him as a fellow human being or as a polluting ‘untouchable’. The action thus expressed a plea for inclusion into the mainstream society as individual human beings, and sharing water served as a symbol of equality and freedom from the oppressive caste barriers. The proposed action of serving beef biryani publicly, on the other hand, would convey a radically different message because of the politically sensitive issue of cow-slaughter, which the Hindu nationalist movement has fiercely propagated against for the past forty years.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, an action of serving beef would be received as a downright provocation and as an insult to all caste Hindus and definitely not as an invitation to tear down caste barriers. Eating beef publicly would be a symbol of cultural pride and outright defiance towards the dominant norms and values of the caste Hindu majority

---

<sup>54</sup> Like in most Indian states, cow slaughter is legally prohibited in Karnataka as per *the Karnataka Prevention of Cow Slaughter and Cattle Preservation Act, 1964*. For a historical account of the Hindu nationalist propagation of ‘cow protection’, see o’Toole (2003).

and a harsh commentary to the Hindu religious forces perpetually trying to include Dalits in the 'mainstream' Hindu fold.<sup>55</sup>

The proposal of serving beef biryani publicly was not carried out while I was in Karnataka. However, the different political messages of the two actions illustrate well the difference between what I in the previous chapter termed as a politics of personal emancipation and a politics of cultural recognition, respectively. While the action of distributing water focused on restoring the social status of the individual and erasing the stigma of Dalit identity, an action of serving beef would aim at articulating and celebrating the cultural identity of the 'untouchable' castes and expose the socio-cultural hegemony of upper caste Hindus. As a symbol of Dalit identity, eating beef thus relates social oppression to cultural tradition, implicating that freedom from oppression is dependent on recognition of cultural difference – and not denial of it.

The radically different political goals of personal emancipation and cultural recognition, respectively, may be analysed as reflecting two different, coexisting ways of understanding the notions of identity and culture. As pointed out by the German anthropologist Martin Sökefeld (1999), the notion of identity may refer both to the self-identity of the individual and to the cultural identity of the group. Used in the meaning of self-identity, identity refers to the self-contained subjectivity and integrity of the individual self; while identity used in the meaning of cultural identity refers to some kind of essential characteristics shared by a specific group. The concept of identity thus connotes significant mutual relations of similarity and difference among individuals and among groups, as it simultaneously refers to the specific intrinsic qualities, which distinguish one individual from the other, and to the shared characteristics, which unite one group of individuals while separating it from other groups.<sup>56</sup> Here it is important to note that the notions of 'self-identity' and 'cultural identity' should not be conceived as independent or conflicting phenomena, but rather as continuous and mutually complementary aspects of personhood and collective being. In practice, however, the two aspects of identity are often experienced as conflicting by the individual, when his or

---

<sup>55</sup> Beef is traditionally eaten by many Muslims, Christians and 'untouchable' castes, including Holeyas and Madigas who do not hold the cow sacred. Serving beef publicly would therefore furthermore draw attention to the convergence of political aims of Dalits and the Muslim and Christian religious minorities, who are all resisting the Hindu nationalist agenda, and point to a possible political alliance between these communities.

<sup>56</sup> The distinction between 'self-identity' and 'social', 'cultural' or 'collective' identity is common in psychology, sociology and anthropology. For instance the British sociologist Richard Jenkins (2000) makes a similar distinction between self identification and group identification and further adds the notion of social categorisation, with which he denotes the identity ascribed to a group or category of people by others.

her personal experience of self deviates considerably from the prevailing meanings ascribed to the cultural identity (s)he is supposed to share.

### **Universalist visions of personal emancipation**

When I asked Dalit movement activists about the meaning of Dalit identity and its relation to the oppression and discrimination that the Scheduled Castes suffer, they generally tended to approach the issue of identity either from the perspective of the individual or from the perspective of the Scheduled Castes as a group. Those who greatly emphasised the individual's loss of dignity and personal standing as a consequence of the humiliating practices of untouchability generally wished for a thorough abolition of caste to set the individual free from the stigmatising label of the 'untouchable' identity. Whereas those who emphasised the misrecognition and suppression of the Scheduled Castes' culture and traditions thought that the Dalit movement should struggle for an overall social, cultural and political strengthening of the Scheduled Castes in relation to the upper castes. The Dalit movement was thus split between a universalist and a communitarian approach to the issue of Dalit liberation which significantly affected the political and strategic choices of the different groupings and organisations in the movement.

Siddaraju, a bank officer in his 40s and a former leading DSS activist, who now characterised himself as a critical sympathiser of the Dalit movement, recollected an experience from his student days when I asked him about his personal experiences of oppression. One evening he and his friends were hanging out in front of the SC/ST hostel where they lived, when a traffic accident suddenly happened. A tempo rolled over on the road in front of them and people were screaming from fear and pain. Siddaraju and his friends rushed to the vehicle and he immediately stretched out his hand to help a woman free from the wreck. To his great astonishment, however, she did not take his hand but looked at him and asked 'What is your caste?' *'I was stunned and I was hurt, totally disappointed,'* he remembered. *'I started feeling that I was committing a mistake.'* Siddaraju stressed the psychological consequences of discrimination and marginalisation: always feeling out place and despised. *'Dalits develop an inferiority complex because of the way we are looked down upon. It itself kills us – kills our self-confidence.'* Siddaraju did not want to identify himself as a Dalit: *'If anybody asks about my caste, I will tell I have no caste and no religion.'* He explained that there had been attempts in the DSS to stress the proposition that 'Dalit is dignified', but he himself did not approve of that interpretation and could not think of anything positive about being a Dalit. Siddaraju did not like that anybody, high or low, took pride in his or her caste.

According to him, the Dalit struggle was not about the uplift of the Scheduled Castes, but about abolishing caste. He did not want a relatively higher degree of equality in the society; he wanted complete equality and a complete demolition of the caste system.

Siddaraju did not deny the existence of cultural difference: *'Every caste in India has its own culture or subculture. Dalits have their own cultural background, speak a rustic kind of language and are not as religious as others.'* However, he did not call for either preservation or recognition of this cultural difference. From his perspective, cultural difference was a historical fact, not a value in itself and therefore he did not regard the prospect of 'losing' Dalit culture in the case of a complete abolition of caste as a threat. Siddaraju's political vision was one of a thoroughly secular and democratic society made up by free and equal individuals and he deeply lamented the communalist tendencies of present Indian politics. In his opinion, the traditional socio-political power structures, based on caste and religious affiliation, were incompatible with the modern values of parliamentary democracy. Like many other former and present DSS activists, Siddaraju thus believed in a universalist and modernist vision of an Indian society of free and equal individuals, in which cultural and religious identities are irrelevant to social interaction and individual life chances.

Siddaraju had been highly inspired by the writings of Ambedkar in his youth, but it was the meeting with the historical materialism of Marxist thinking which had profoundly shaped his way of thinking. *'It has really enriched me and changed the way I look on society. After reading Marx, I started losing the inferiority complex and developing myself.'* Siddaraju thus put emphasis on the restoration of the individual's sense of self and related this aim directly to the struggle for a thorough redistribution of economic resources. Siddaraju generally used the term Dalit in the very literary sense of the word as somebody who is downtrodden and broken because of the caste system and the implicated notion of untouchability. With his explicit focus on both personal emancipation and economic redistribution as the two main objectives of the Dalit movement, he thus stayed with the original ideology of the Dalit movement as it was formulated by the DSS more than thirty years ago.

Another declared Marxist, the renowned writer, poet and folklorist Dr. Siddalingaiah was also committed to the idea of radically abolishing caste. Siddalingaiah had been one of the leading figures of the Dalit literary movement in the beginning of the 1970s and was later one of the original founders of the DSS. He was then known for his militantly aggressive poems aimed against the upper caste oppressors. 'Kick them, beat them, skin these bastards alive' sounds a famous passage from one of his poems which

significantly shaped the consciousness of young Dalit activists in the 1970s.<sup>57</sup>

Siddalingaiah grew up in the impoverished environment of a large, miserable Dalit slum in Bangalore and worked his way up to his present prestigious office as professor and dean at Bangalore University. During one of my interviews with Siddalingaiah, I asked him, if he still considered himself a Dalit in spite of his present social and economic status. “*Certainly I am a Dalit,*” he immediately answered, but then elaborated: “*Eh., well., I do not always feel that I am a Dalit. I am a human being, basically. [...] but society pointed out “you are a Dalit”.*”<sup>58</sup>

Like Siddaraju, Siddalingaiah emphasised the imposed character of Dalit identity and the sufferings of the individual because of the ‘Dalit label’. Siddalingaiah thus suggested that the Scheduled Castes’ cultural identity prevented them from being recognised as individuals and was even used to negate their very humanity. Personally, he felt hurt when he was always pointed out as the ‘famous Dalit poet’ in conferences and seminars when other poets and writers were addressed without any reference to their caste. In the experience of Siddalingaiah, the Dalit label and its degrading connotations therefore always adhered to the person regardless of his or her merits and economic status.

Contrary to Siddaraju, however, Siddalingaiah as a folklorist took much interest in the distinctive cultural traditions of the Scheduled Castes, on which he had published several studies. Therefore, Siddalingaiah fully realised that the abolition of caste and consequential abandonment of a separate caste identities might give rise to feelings of alienation and rootlessness, even for people from the Scheduled Castes who suffered stigmatisation and discrimination because of their identities. In fact, one of his own earliest poems ‘They are still sitting there’ related to the sense of loss and alienation that the Dalit protagonist – allegorically described as a sacrificial ram – experiences, when he is violently forced to renounce his own cultural background and comply with the upper caste norms in order to be recognised as a human being (Siddalingaiah 2002).<sup>59</sup> To Siddalingaiah, the issue of Dalit identity thus posed a real political dilemma, since he on the one hand appreciated the uniqueness and cultural worth of the Scheduled Castes’ customs and traditions and, on the other hand, maintained that the very existence of caste was the root cause of the Scheduled Castes’ present misery. However, Siddalingaiah believed that caste had to be abolished to set the individual free and was deeply concerned about the new tendencies in the Dalit movement to glorify Dalit identity and demand recognition of the Dalits’ cultural values and traditions while accepting the caste

---

<sup>57</sup> The poem ‘A Song’ is from Siddalingaiah’s debut collection of poems ‘Hole Madigara Hadu’, which was published in 1976. See Nagaraj (1994: 19) for a larger extract of this poem.

<sup>58</sup> See the quotation in its full length in the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>59</sup> See Nagaraj (1994: 22) for further interpretation of the poem ‘They are still sitting there’.

structures as ‘natural’ to the Indian society. As a Marxist, he moreover found that the economic deprivation of the Scheduled Castes was simply not taken seriously enough by those who took this stand. ‘*After all you cannot eat culture,*’ he explained.

For both Siddaraju and Siddalingaiah, it was the self-identity of the individual that was focus for their interpretation of Dalit identity, rather than the cultural identity of the Scheduled Castes – or of the Holeya Caste, to which they both belonged. Focusing on the psychological pain of the individual, they both regarded the institution of caste as the root cause of the Dalits’ depression and despair. Putting emphasis on the universal, autonomous individual rather than the community of caste(s), they therefore accepted the idea that the institution of caste and with that the cultural identity of the Scheduled Castes had to be opposed in order to secure the freedom of the individual.

At the time of my fieldwork, neither Siddaraju nor Siddalingaiah were actively involved in the activities of the DSS anymore. Siddaraju was more or less equally disillusioned with all parts of the DSS, while Siddalingaiah continued to support the factions of the DSS that maintained the original ideology of the Dalit movement. However, the approach of the two old-time Dalit activists was by and large shared by all the DSS leaders and activists that I interviewed and talked to. All insisted that the ultimate aim of Dalit struggle was to abolish caste. On the short term, however, they continued to fight for the rights of the Scheduled Castes in the name of Dalits and thus promoted the identity they wished to dismantle.

### **Liberation through caste-based parliamentary power**

In spite of the fact that most of the leading BSP members in Karnataka had a past with the DSS, they now generally had a completely different approach to the issues of caste and identity than most DSS leaders. They firmly believed that parliamentary power was the key to stop the discrimination and exploitation of the Scheduled Castes and usually described the BSP as the direct heir to Ambedkar’s unfinished struggle to unite the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes into a single voting bloc. Whereas DSS leaders tended to emphasise the suffering and psychological pain of the individual when they argued for the need of thoroughly abolishing caste, BSP leaders often emphasised how the Scheduled Castes as a community was misrecognised, betrayed and exploited, when they argued for the need of capturing parliamentary power.

N. Mahesh was one of the prominent leaders of the BSP in Karnataka. In the late 1980s, he was part of one of the first splinter groups to break away from the DSS because of a general discontent with the political strategies of the movement. He



explained that the BSP was not against the institution of caste as such, but specifically against what he termed as 'casteism'. *'If a Gowda does not want to give his daughter to my son [in marriage], I don't mind. Let them keep their identity, but exploitation in the name of caste should go.'*<sup>60</sup> N. Mahesh believed that the caste structures originated in ancient India where they *'all were tribal groups'* and he did therefore see no harm in the system itself. *'Once casteism disappears, caste is not at all a problem,'* he explained. In his view, the practice of caste-based discrimination was largely the result of complex psychological mechanisms which should be countered mainly with educational and economic empowerment of the oppressed. If that was accomplished, N. Mahesh believed that discrimination would disappear by itself.

To emphasise his point, N. Mahesh explained how he had personally faced discrimination until he became educated, obtained a government job and got money to spend. Then his status completely changed and he could suddenly move freely, drink water wherever he wanted and visit hotels and temples as he liked – while his father, who had worked as a bonded labourer, was still discriminated against. According to N. Mahesh, Scheduled Caste identity was not the root cause for discrimination and exploitation, and neither was caste. Therefore, he did not call for a radical change of the society's underlying social and economic structures as did the DSS, but suggested that the Scheduled Castes should educate themselves and utilise the democratic structures to gain political power collectively. The responsibility for the continued oppression of the Scheduled Castes was thus as much on themselves as on the upper castes, given the fact that the Indian Constitution granted all citizens the freedom of vote.<sup>61</sup> For N. Mahesh, the social institution of caste was thus not a problem in itself. Quite the contrary, he regarded caste identity as a valuable social resource which the Scheduled Castes had still not learnt to utilise politically to their own advantage. Instead of struggling against caste and thereby undermining their own cultural identity, the real challenge for the Scheduled Castes was to build a broad political alliance uniting all subordinate castes in order to grab political power collectively.

Contrary to Siddaraju, Siddalingaiah and many other old-time Dalit movement activists, N. Mahesh did not regard caste identity as a social and psychological

---

<sup>60</sup> Gowda is another word for the Vokkaliga caste. The Vokkaligas/Gowdas are classified as OBCs in rural Karnataka and form part of the 'Bahujan Samaj' or great majority that the BSP struggles to create and mobilise politically. As a 'dominant' caste of landowning cultivators that typically employ people from the Scheduled Castes and play a powerful role in village politics, the Gowdas are often experienced as the immediate social and economic oppressors by the Scheduled Castes.

<sup>61</sup> The fact that B.R. Ambedkar was the chairman of the committee that drafted the Indian constitution was by many BSP activists interpreted as a proof of the fundamental justice and infallibility of India's parliamentary democracy.

straightjacket for the individual, but as an inherent aspect of personhood in Indian society. In his opinion, the aim of Dalit liberation was not a society without castes, but a society of equal and autonomous castes. N. Mahesh thus regarded the Scheduled Castes' deep depression as a reflection of the existing power relations between the different caste communities in Indian and *not* as an essential implication of caste. In his opinion it was therefore the present power relations that had to be changed, not the institution of caste itself.

N. Mahesh's approach to caste and to the aim of Dalit struggle was shared by many leading BSP members in Karnataka. Some BSP members, however, explained that it was still the ultimate goal of the BSP to abolish caste.<sup>62</sup> *'If we get power, we can remove caste,'* the treasurer of BSP in Karnataka, O. Rajanna, assured me, although he later added that *'because we were suppressed for two thousand years, now at least for hundred or two hundred years we should rule'*. Like many other Dalit activists, O. Rajanna was thus split between the wish to completely abolish caste and the wish to strengthen the power and social standing of the Scheduled Castes in order to redress their collective humiliation and subjugation. Nonetheless, he believed that the grab of political power through broad caste-based alliances was the only way to create real change for the Scheduled Castes.

By the adversaries of the BSP, the party's attempt to build a political constituency of Bahujan Samaj was usually dismissed as opportunist 'number politics' that reduced Dalit struggle and democratic politics to a question of demography and diluted the ideological foundation of the Dalit movement. Particularly, the coalition government between the BSP and its sworn enemies in the Hindu nationalist party BJP in Uttar Pradesh was the object of heavy criticism. For the BSP leaders, however, the Dalit struggle was a struggle for power with all means, even if it meant collaborating with the perceived oppressors of the Dalits and accepting caste as the basis of society and of political power. According to the state president of the BSP in Karnataka, B. Gopal, the party's alliance with the BJP in the state of Uttar Pradesh was thus not in any way betraying the principles of the party's anti-Brahminical ideology.<sup>63</sup> Quite the contrary he explained, since the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh's coalition government, Mayawathi,

---

<sup>62</sup> In her study of the history of the BSP, the political scientist Suddha Pai describes BSP's ideology as 'uncompromising in its attitude towards the caste system, which they refuse to accept and hope to change on capturing power' (Pai 2001: 270). As I have described here, however, many – if not even the majority – of the BSP leaders and activists that I interacted with during my study, now regarded the struggle against caste as futile.

<sup>63</sup> At the time of the fieldwork, the BSP had formed a coalition government together with the BJP since 1997. This coalition was a highly controversial in the Dalit movement, since the BJP as a Hindu nationalist party was identified as the ideological enemy of Dalits and as a representative of the Brahmin castes and their political interests.

was from the BSP. *'We have not joined the BJP'*, he explained, *'we have made them to support us'*.

Like N. Mahesh and most other BSP leaders and activists, B. Gopal explained the present status of the Scheduled Castes as a result of the Aryan invasion more than three thousand years ago and the historic clashes between Hindus (Brahmins) and Buddhists that B.R. Ambedkar had described. Thus, the history of the Scheduled Castes was a history of loss and enslavement that had bereaved the communities of their original cultural identities and left them without land, dignity and power – making Dalit a non-identity solely characterised in the negative as a state of deprivation, humiliation and oppression. While, B. Gopal and other BSP leaders and activist accepted caste as part of Indian society, they did not want to rehabilitate or glorify the existing cultural traditions of the Scheduled Castes. Quite the contrary, they wanted the Scheduled Castes to come to the middleclass mainstream, but without accepting Hinduism as a common cultural denominator.

Following the example of Ambedkar, many BSP leaders and activists favoured the identity of Buddhist, which they found represented the true, dignified identity of the Scheduled Castes and quite a number of BSP leaders and supporters of the party had even started practising Buddhism by changing to a vegetarian diet and going to the Buddhist temple regularly. Even though the BSP leaders in Karnataka firmly believed in the political necessity of uniting the Bahujan Samaj of SCs, OBCs and religious minorities politically, I never heard any of them identifying themselves with this umbrella identity. The identity of Bahujan Samaj was thus a purely strategic invention that should help the Scheduled Castes to seize power and change the existing power relations in the country.

### **Communitarian visions of cultural recognition**

While the BSP leaders usually had a profoundly different perception of caste and discrimination than the former and present DSS leaders, they did all agree that the Dalit struggle should aim at bringing the Scheduled Castes on par with the general population socially and economically and bring them to 'the mainstream' as it was often formulated. However, some of the new Dalit organisations that had emerged in the 1990s challenged that idea and claimed that the aim of Dalit struggle was to protect the unique culture and lifestyle of the Dalits from the imposition of the values and lifestyles of the Hindu mainstream which was successfully propagated by the Hindu nationalist movement.

One of the Dalit organisations in Karnataka that explicitly struggled for the recognition of Dalit culture was the small, but very active 'Dalit mattu Mahila Chaluvali' (Dalit and Women's Movement) (DMC). In this organisation, located on the southern outskirts of Bangalore, where new high-rise luxury apartments were now mushrooming in glaring contrast to the neighbouring poor villages, questions of culture, identity and history were the pivotal points of agitation. The DMC mainly worked with consciousness-raising of local Scheduled Caste youth through meetings, workshops and seminars on issues of e.g., democracy, women's rights and globalisation. On all such occasions, community singing and drum and dance performances were important parts of the program, underscoring the importance that the organisation put on culture and identity.

The DMC was a grassroots organisation of mainly young people from the Holeya and the Bhovi caste, the latter being one of the few Scheduled Castes that is not affected by the stigma of untouchability. Contrary to probably all other Dalit organisations in Karnataka, the DMC had a flat, democratic structure, no formal leadership and an almost equal representation of men and women among its core members. The organisation had started out in the early 1990s as a small educational and income-generating project for Scheduled Caste women lead by nuns from a local convent, but had over the years developed into a political Dalit organisation that was highly critical of the established Dalit movement and its visions of liberation.

For the DMC activists the aim of Dalit struggle was not to become part of the mainstream culture and work for the eradication of separate caste identities, but quite the contrary to rediscover, strengthen and reevaluate the cultural identities of the Scheduled Castes in order not to become swallowed up by the Hindu mainstream. While DSS and BSP activists typically made great efforts to point out that people from the Scheduled Castes were honest and respectable people, who were just as moral and civilized as everybody else in the Indian society, the activists of the DMC presented themselves as 'uncivilized people' who were drinking, smoking, fighting and quarrelling. According to the DMC activists, Dalit culture was rough and simple, characterised by tough living conditions and tough manners and by considerable consumption of alcohol by both men and women. Most importantly, Dalit culture was characterised as a culture of fairness, integrity and equality as opposed to the oppressive, hierarchical culture of caste Hindus. *'If a husband beats his wife, she hits him back,'* the activists used to tell me as an example of the rough type of gender equality allegedly typical of Dalit culture.

The DMC activists thus described Dalit identity much in the same way as it was generally perceived and imagined by the upper castes, but in their opinion this characteristic was nothing to be ashamed of, quite the contrary. According to the DMC

activists, it was thus not the psychological onslaught on the feelings of the individual, which was the main problem of the Scheduled Castes, but the systematic devaluation, stigmatisation and discrimination of the community.

When the Jesuit run 'Indian Social Institute' (ISI) in Bangalore in 2003 offered to host a DMC youth seminar on democracy for free, the DMC first accepted the generous offer, but later decided to move the event to their own humble premises. The ISI was too disciplined for their people, the DMC activists explained, when I asked why they had called the arrangement off. In the premises of ISI smoking and drinking was prohibited and they were not allowed to sing and play late in the evening either. Moreover, the whole place was not compatible with the lifestyle of 'their people' I was explained: the beds were too soft and the food was a middleclass type of food with rice and too many dishes. As one activist explained, they were used to eating *ragi mudde*<sup>64</sup> and sleep on a mat on the floor; that was their culture and they did not want to change it for a more comfortable life. While the Dalit movement in Karnataka for decades had struggled to bring the Scheduled Castes on par with the general population and secure them a comfortable life with soft beds and ample good food, the DMC instead attempted to preserve and revalue the culture and lifestyle of Scheduled Castes. The DMC thus wished to profoundly change the way that Dalit culture and identity was conceived and with that the very meaning of poverty and oppression.

Despite of the name of their organisation, the DMC activists had almost stopped using the term Dalit in their agitation, realising that each of the Scheduled Caste communities had their own historic identity and culture. The DMC activists were not against the term Dalit as a general designation, but took pride in their individual caste identities of Holeyas and Bhovis. The fact that each caste constituted an individual community with its own unique history and traditions was in their opinion a cultural value that had to be recognised and appreciated by the Dalit movement – and not hushed up, which for many years had been the case in Karnataka. The DMC activists thus clearly repudiated the idea that Dalit identity should be defined in the negative as a state of loss and deprivation, the way many old-time DSS activists tended to define it. Quite the contrary, they thought that the identity of Dalit – and of the individual communities denoted by the term – should be defined in the positive as a wealth of culture and tradition. It was thus not the poverty or personal pain and agony caused by caste-based discrimination that was the focus of DMC, but the systematic devaluation of the Scheduled Castes as culture-bearing communities.

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ragi mudde* (ragi balls) are chewy, brown, dough-like balls made of finger millet flour and water, typical of rural Karnataka where they are usually eaten with a sauce of vegetables, lentils or meat.

Focusing on the cultural identity of the Scheduled Caste communities, rather than on the self-identity of the individual, the Dalit struggle of the DMC was first and foremost a struggle for cultural recognition and self-respect, while issues of poverty, untouchability and political power were generally not given much attention by the organisation. When I once directly addressed the question of untouchability, the informal leader of the DMC, Chenappa, stated that these traditional forms of insult and disrespect should generally be ignored and not made the pivotal of political agitation since that would simply underscore the general victimisation of the Scheduled Castes and contribute to a negative self-image<sup>65</sup>. Chenappa was thus a sharp critic of the traditional Dalit movement, particularly the DSS, and of the way the Scheduled Castes in his opinion had been represented solely as ‘broken’ or downtrodden victims of oppression. *‘I am not “broken”,’* he insisted and also denied to be poor, even though he and his family like the other DMC activists lived on a very small budget, not a bit higher than the other Scheduled Caste families in his village. In his opinion, the portrayal of the Scheduled Castes as poor contributed to the state of victimisation and self-pity that had characterised the Dalit movement for decades. *‘If you first accept that you are poor, it is very difficult to change your mind,’* he explained and suggested that the Scheduled Castes should in fact be regarded as very rich because of their great physical and intellectual strength and endurance.

The DMC thus propagated a radically different identity for the Scheduled Caste than that of the traditional Dalit movement and consistently refused to accept the portrayal of the Scheduled Caste communities as broken and humiliated victims of upper caste domination. Struggling for cultural recognition of, the DMC activists dreamt of a society where the Scheduled Castes were thoroughly autonomous, independent and self-contained and had stopped measuring themselves against the values and lifestyles of the Hindu middleclass. While the DSS originally wanted to undermine and transgress caste boundaries and create an Indian society based on universal values of individual freedom and integrity, the DMC on the contrary envisaged an Indian society that fully acknowledged the value of cultural difference and made room for a new decidedly non-hierarchical form of social coexistence between different communities.

One of the great inspirations for the DMC was the Kannada writer and intellectual Mogalli Ganesh’s vision of bringing the Scheduled Castes back to their traditional artisan economies and lifestyles as a guard against the impact of economic

---

<sup>65</sup> This view may be explained by the fact that Chenappa belonged to the ‘non-untouchable’ Bhovi caste and had never himself been exposed to practices of untouchability. However, the view was also expressed by DMC activists belonging to the ‘untouchable’ Holeya caste. Living on the outskirts of Bangalore City, however, the activists had never experienced untouchability the way it was practised in the remote villages of north and central Karnataka.

globalisation and liberalisation and as a source of social strength (Ganesh 2003).<sup>66</sup> The DMC thus regarded the unique cultural characteristics of the Scheduled Castes as a social resource that still waited to be acknowledged and accepted by the people themselves. At the time of my fieldwork, Chenappa tried to raise money for a study of the cultural practices of the Bhovi caste in different parts of Karnataka as he found that the Bhovis – or Vaddas<sup>67</sup> as he preferred to call his community – like most other Scheduled Caste communities were largely ignorant about their own history and cultural heritage and had uncritically accepted the depressed identity ascribed to them by others.

Approaching the issue of identity from the perspective of the community, Chenappa did not perceive the continued existence of caste as an obstacle to Dalit liberation, but quite the contrary as the main prerequisite of freedom for the Scheduled Caste masses. Even Chenappa did, however, particularly during one of our many conversations question the meaning and significance of caste identity when he asked what did actually make him a Vadda as he was sitting there talking with me, one person to the other. Why did it make sense to characterise him as a Vadda and not just as Chenappa in conversation with Caroline, two different individuals with each their distinctive personal history? *‘Basically, caste is ideology,’* he explained and thus accepted not only the significance of the individual, but also the constructedness of caste and community.<sup>68</sup> The realisation that caste was essentially a social construct did not make Chenappa and the DMC demand the abolition of caste like the DSS and other old-time Dalit organisations, quite the contrary they accepted caste as a lived reality and as an important part of history which could and should not be erased in the name of equality. Instead of demanding the abolition of caste as a solution to end discrimination and exploitation, the DMC therefore suggested a positive reinterpretation of caste as a source of community and solidarity that could serve as a protection against the dominance of the powerful upper castes. Contrary to the modernist visions of an Indian society of free and equal individuals, the DMC gave priority to the rehabilitation of

---

<sup>66</sup> Mogalli Ganesh is a scholar of folklore and Kannada literature from the Kannada University in Hampi and a writer of fiction writing in Kannada. As one of the leading intellectuals of the contemporary Dalit movement in Karnataka, Mogalli Ganesh represents a communitarian approach to Dalit politics, much in contrast to the universalist approaches of intellectuals and founding fathers of the Dalit movement in the state like Siddalingaiah and Devanoor Mahadev.

<sup>67</sup> The Bhovi caste is also known as Vadda (also transcribed as Wadda, Odda, and Vaddera) in Karnataka. According to the DMC activists, ‘Bhovi’ was considered more respectable than Vadda, though Vadda was the original name of the caste.

<sup>68</sup> Chenappa had studied philosophy for a couple of semesters in a university correspondence course and was accordingly well versed in contemporary philosophical thinking and often referred to the thinking of Michel Foucault. The idea that caste was basically a social construction was therefore not at all unfamiliar to Chenappa, though he did never use exactly the English word ‘construction’ in any of our discussions.

caste-based community and thus prioritised cultural recognition over personal emancipation.

### **Questioning universalism**

The increasing scepticism in the Dalit movement towards the universalist, anti-caste agenda, propagated by the DSS since the 1970s, has, as I described in the previous chapter, been interpreted as a reaction to the unredeemed promises of economic development and social welfare by the Congress party and as an adaptation to the growing communalisation of Indian politics. While my study on the whole supports that analysis, it also shows that the primary schism of the Dalit movement is not between a politics focused on economic redistribution and poverty alleviation, on the one hand, and a politics of identity formation, on the other, but between different ways of politicising Dalit identity. The Dalit movement is thus split between representing the identity of Dalit as an imposed ‘non-identity’ bereft of economic livelihood, social status and human dignity and as a culturally rich and vibrant collective tradition – or indeed many different, unique traditions.

D.R. Nagaraj (1993), a Kannada literary critic and avowed sympathiser of the Dalit movement, finds that the political schism within the Dalit movement reflects the vastly different outlooks and experiences of the small educated, urban Scheduled Caste middleclass and the impoverished, uneducated rural masses. In his analysis of Dalit identity politics, Nagaraj describes the universalist approach to Dalit liberation as a mode of ‘alternative memory’ typical of the SC middleclass that does not accept the existence of any liberative elements in the living experience and cultural memories of the Scheduled Castes. In accepting that Dalit culture is basically worthless, however, this mode of representing Dalit identity does not provide a genuine alternative to the dominant representation of the ascribed ‘untouchable’ identity, Nagaraj argues, but basically reproduces the ruling ‘upper caste’ norms of society, while exposing the shame and self-hatred of the Scheduled Caste middleclass. The universalist approach to Dalit liberation, privileging self-identity over cultural identity and personal emancipation over cultural recognition does therefore not have a real subversive potential since the emancipation of the individual does not radically challenge the cultural hegemony of the ‘upper caste’ Hindu mainstream.

In contrast, Nagaraj characterises the communitarian approach to Dalit liberation as a mode of ‘radical revivalism’ that takes the actual practices and experiences of the Scheduled Caste majority as a starting point for political action and aims at transforming the symbolic values of Dalit culture and identity rather than



creating a new mainstream identity for the Scheduled Castes. When a growing number of Dalit organisations and activists in the early 2000s accepted caste as an inherent part of Indian society and embraced the struggle for cultural recognition, it may thus be interpreted as a far more radical protest than the anti-caste struggle for mainstreaming and personal emancipation. In insisting on the cultural worth and uniqueness of even the most stigmatised traditions and practises of the Scheduled Castes, the call for cultural recognition challenged the long-established universalist definition of social equality as absence of difference, insisting that the solution to stigmatisation and discrimination is not a political strategy of cultural dissolution and self-destruction.

As we have seen, Nagaraj's analysis may immediately be applied to the case of the DMC, whose activists did not only demand respect of their equal worth as individual human beings, but insisted on being respected collectively because of, not despite, their cultural identity and refused to conform to any of the established cultural norms of the 'upper castes'. When a growing number of Dalit activists and organisations in the early 2000s had abandoned the struggle against caste and untouchability in favour of a politics of cultural recognition it may thus be interpreted as a protest against the tacit dominance of 'upper caste' cultural values, even within the Dalit movement. To some extent, Nagaraj's analysis may also be applicable to the BSP whose leaders in many cases embraced and propagated their supposedly original Buddhist identity in contrast to the increasingly politicised identity of Hindu as a means of distancing themselves to the Hindu nationalist movement and its attempts to include the Scheduled Castes in the mainstream Hindu 'we'.

However, the present study does not quite support Nagaraj's proposition that the strategic schism between personal emancipation and cultural recognition reflects the social schism between the small urban, educated Scheduled Caste middleclass that has 'come up in life', as it is often expressed, and the large impoverished masses of mainly rural Scheduled Caste workers.<sup>69</sup> Though many of the experienced DSS leaders had indeed advanced socially and economically, the individual factions of the DSS, taken together, still organised by far the largest number of villagers and urban poor in the state.

Alternatively, the study suggests that the increased strategic schism between politics of personal emancipation and cultural recognition in part reflects the diminishing

---

<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that Nagaraj's book on the Dalit movement in Karnataka 'The Flaming Feet' was published in 1993, before the emergence of organisations like REDS, DMC and MRHS. Nagaraj's discussion of the politicisation of Dalit identity related specifically to the emerging contradictions between orthodox Ambedkarites, supporting the BSP, who refused to identify with any traditional elements of their identities and activists like Siddalingaiah, Nagaraj's close friend, who took an interest in and openly appreciated the cultural and spiritual world of the Scheduled Castes with its many unique traditions, myths and legends. Still, I find that Nagaraj's analysis is relevant to the present study and contributes to the argument.

influence and popularity of modernist, universalist ideologies in the Indian academia. In the early 2000s, it was no longer the ideas of Marx, Lohia or Ambedkar that were discussed by ‘progressive’ students, activists and NGO workers in meetings and seminars, but the ideas of post-structuralist and post-colonialist writers like Michel Foucault, Franz Fanon and the Kannada scholar Mogalli Ganesh. The last mentioned writers inspired a shift of focus from the modernist ‘sovereign’ subject to socially constructed differences and identities and a critique of the vision of a society ‘with only two castes: men and women’<sup>70</sup> that characterised the universalist vision of liberty and equality.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have shown how the political visions of Dalit liberation expressed by Dalit leaders and activists in Karnataka were closely related to the way they perceived of Dalit identity and Dalit culture. Activists, who described Dalit identity in the negative as a ‘non-identity’ characterised primarily by the absence of human dignity generally perceived the stigmatisation of the Scheduled Castes as the worst aspects of oppression and shared a vision of a society of free and equal individuals completely free from caste divisions. Activists, who described Dalit identity as the collective expression of a rich and vibrant cultural tradition, on the other hand, emphasised the misrecognition and disrespect of the Scheduled Castes as a people or their lack of political power and generally shared a vision of a society of equal and autonomous communities, where no single caste or cluster of castes were dominating the others.

Overall, the leaders and activists were divided between an agenda of personal emancipation and an agenda of cultural recognition; the former stressing the need to set the individual free from the oppressive stigma of untouchability and the latter stressing the need to strengthen the Scheduled Castes politically and culturally in order to be able to resist oppression and discrimination. The Dalit movement in Karnataka was thus torn between a universalist vision of a world free of social boundaries and divides and a communitarian vision of a world made up of individual communities with each their unique history and distinctive cultural traits and traditions.

---

<sup>70</sup> The idea of a society with ‘only two castes: men and women’ was often presented as the natural ideal by particularly male DSS leaders and activists.

## CHAPTER 6

### DALIT DILEMMAS OF IDENTITY, SOLIDARITY AND BELONGING

‘The caste system is nothing but institutionalised oppression and egoism, built on the ideology of *naanu, nandu, nanage* [me, mine, for me only]’

Fr. S.D. Joseph, member of the Karnataka Dalit Christian Federation (KDCF)

‘The caste system is an obstacle to human instincts, an obstacle for human beings to behave like human beings. One has to be against it and go against it.’

Devanoor Mahadev, renowned writer and intellectual, co-founder of the DSS

‘India is a country of castes. Castes have been in existence here from time immemorial. If castes had been a problem and unwanted, the people themselves would have destroyed it long ago. The very fact that caste continues to exist is proof that it is not only harmless, but also useful to the people.’

V.T. Rajshekar, journalist and editor of the fortnightly magazine ‘Dalit Voice’ (Rajshekar 2002:2)

In this last chapter, I will turn the perspective from the issue of Dalit identity and the strategic dilemmas of politicising caste to the personal and emotional choices and dilemmas accompanying many Dalit activists’ political views on the issue of identity. As the previous chapters have suggested the Dalit movement in Karnataka is not only split between universalist and communitarian ideals of liberation and equality, but also between two coexistent, yet irreconcilable interpretations of caste as respectively an oppressive hierarchical institution and as the ‘natural’ manifestation of cultural difference. As I shall argue, the political schism of the Dalit movement does therefore not only reflect a strategic dilemma, but also a much deeper personal and emotional dilemma, relating to the innate dichotomy between the individual and the community and to the ambiguous reality of caste.

### **Institutionalised oppression or social resource?**

When asked about the meaning of caste, Dalit leaders and activists in Karnataka expressed two different views. On the one hand, caste was described as an inhuman and ‘unnatural’ form of institutionalised oppression, based on the ritual distinction between purity and pollution of Hindu religion that defined the majority of the Scheduled Castes as so inherently low and polluted that they were untouchable to people from all other castes. On the other hand, caste was described as a social structure of competing ethno-cultural communities, which was often explained with reference to the Aryan invasion of the Indian subcontinent several thousand years ago. The Dalit leaders and activists thus described caste in close accordance with the two general models of caste as, respectively, a static hierarchy and a dynamic structure of individual ethno-cultural communities as described by e.g., Gupta (2000, 2004) and Jayaram (1996).

The catholic priest Fr. S.D. Joseph from the Karnataka Dalit Christian Federation (KDCF) expressed the first mentioned view on caste, when he during one of our conversations stated that caste was built on the ideology of ‘*naanu, nandu, nanage*’ (me, mine, for me only) as a religiously legitimated hierarchy designed to keep others down. Though originating in the religious dichotomy between ritual purity and pollution of Hindu cosmology, the selfishness and nepotism associated with caste was found in all parts of Indian society, he claimed, and upper caste Hindus and upper caste Christians were all the same when it came to oppressive and discriminatory practices. To be a Dalit basically meant to be ‘*suffering, suffocating and scared*’ Fr. S.D. Joseph stated and thus thought of caste purely as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the Brahmins and upper castes.

The opposite view was, as I have already described, maintained by a growing number of Dalit leaders and activists in the early 2000s. The controversial<sup>71</sup> journalist and editor of the fortnightly magazine ‘Dalit Voice’, V.T. Rajshekar, was one of the most ardent proponents of the view that caste was a natural component of Indian society. According to V.T. Rajshekar individual castes were comparable to separate nations<sup>72</sup> or tribes that each shared a distinct history and cultural identity and whose members internally shared a high degree of solidarity. In his view caste was neither harmful nor the reason for the Scheduled Castes’ present misery and therefore

---

<sup>71</sup> The former journalist on the national newspaper Indian Express, V.T. Rajshekar (Shetty), was a highly controversial figure in the Dalit movement in Karnataka, who used expressions as ‘Hindu Nazis’ and often sketched a world conspiracy between Brahmins and Jews and agitated for the usefulness of Mao’s doctrine that your enemy’s enemy is your friend. V.T. Rajshekar had many years ago discarded his last name Shetty, which was also the name of his caste, not to be associated with a particular caste membership.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Rajshekar (2002).

he found it downright stupid to fight for the abolition of caste. *'I have not found any Brahmins wanting to destroy caste,'* he claimed and explained the social, economic and cultural dominance of the Brahmins as a result of the strong bonds of intimacy and solidarity prevailing among the Brahminical castes. In his view caste was a source of strength waiting to be exhausted by the individual Scheduled Castes, who unfortunately had been struggling for the abolition of caste in the name of equality. The religious interpretation of caste as a hierarchy based on the notions of ritual purity and pollution, did V.T. Rajshekar completely reject: *'In India religion is a dress, what is important is blood,'* he explained and thus denied that caste was anything but another word for ethno-cultural difference.<sup>73</sup>

When it comes to the characterisation of caste as a social institution, the lines are thus sharply drawn between those who demand the abolition of caste and those who struggle for the relative strengthening of the Scheduled Caste as a group. Nevertheless, it was my impression that many, if not the majority, of the Dalit activists actually had great difficulties imagining an Indian society without distinctions of caste in one or the other form.

### **A difference that makes a difference**

One day during my second month of fieldwork I had participated in the meeting of a small group of mainly Scheduled Caste college students in one of the large government colleges in Bangalore.<sup>74</sup> Walking to the nearby bus stand after the meeting, one of the students, a young man, asked me, if we also had castes in Denmark. Somewhat astounded by the question, I answered *'No. In Denmark we don't even know what castes are'.* *'But then, how do you tell the difference between people?'* he asked. *'But we don't',* I explained. *'In Denmark we are basically one people only.'* Not satisfied with that answer, another student went on and asked if we had different religions in Denmark. To that I answered that there is a rather small number of newly immigrated Muslims in Denmark, but that the Danish people basically are Christians. *'Catholics or Protestants?'* he asked. I answered that apart from a very small minority of Catholics, all Christians in

---

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly enough, V.T. Rajshekar himself was 'a Dalit by choice' as he expressed it since he actually belonged to the small, but powerful OBC-caste of Shettys (as his last discarded name suggested), which he disdainfully characterised as a *'stupid caste'* of *'bloody fools'*. V.T. Rajshekar did thus not himself practise caste the way he claimed that caste should be practised, when he preferred to struggle for the rights of the Scheduled Caste.

<sup>74</sup> The student activist group 'Chilume' in Government Arts College cannot itself be characterised as a Dalit movement organisation, but many of the students participating in the group were also very active in the Dalit movement, which was the reason that I had been invited to participate in the meeting.

Denmark are Protestants. '*But then you do have castes in Denmark,*' the student exclaimed almost triumphantly.

In the meeting we had been discussing problems of discrimination of Scheduled Caste students in colleges, universities, and hostels and at least some of the students had nodded approvingly, when I – rather one-sidedly – had declared that I thought that caste ought to be abolished. However, my casual exchange of words with the students afterwards on the way to the bus stand clearly showed that the idea of a society without any caste distinctions in fact was quite inconceivable to many of them and not that desirable either, since caste provides identity and orientation in an otherwise confusingly heterogeneous society. Caste identity is thus a difference that makes a difference, so to speak, and not just an arbitrary label stuck on the head of individuals to mark their relative social status.

The idea that the society is basically constituted by distinct, though often overlapping, named groups and communities, rather than simply by an infinite number of individuals is widespread among Dalit movement activists and sympathisers, as in the south Indian society at large. Remarks about 'these people' and 'our people' are common in everyday discourse and it is characteristic that the definition of 'our people' changes with the context. When used by Dalit activists in casual conversations, the expression 'our people' may therefore refer to anything from the family-group, *kula* (subcaste), or caste of the subject speaking to all the Scheduled Castes or to the people of their village, their state, or even the country as opposed to people from other villages, states, or countries.<sup>75</sup> The constant distinguishing between 'us' and 'others' is in other words characteristic of the way that social relations are evaluated in contemporary Karnataka.

It is indeed this principle of distinction and categorisation that according to the Sri Lankan-American anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel (1987) best characterises the notion of caste, which he argues shall not be understood as a separate system of social organisation, but as the reflection of a much more basic principle of differentiation and valuation, which is applied to almost all things and 'substances' on the basis of their supposed essences. According to this interpretation the social institution of caste is but one manifestation of an overall cosmology in which the notions of hierarchy and difference are inseparable and therefore caste cannot be discarded and abolished at will, unless the whole cosmology is dismantled.

---

<sup>75</sup> M.N. Srinivas has termed this phenomenon 'the horizontal stretch of castes', indicating that the boundaries of caste are becoming increasingly elastic and contextual in the modern Indian society (Srinivas 1996:xiii).

### **Politics of caste and marriage**

The question of marriage and in particular inter-caste marriage was one of the issues that really divided the Dalit activists in their views on the aims and political strategies of the Dalit movement. For logically an increase of marriages across caste boundaries is the main prerequisite for abolishing the institution of caste, since this ultimately depends thoroughly on the observation of traditional endogamous marriage practices. The issue of marriage is therefore closely related to the schism between demands of personal emancipation and cultural recognition that is increasingly splitting the Dalit movement in Karnataka. However, the issue of marriage does also expose the sensitivity of the issue of caste and the personal and emotional dilemmas that are related to the questions of Dalit identity and Dalit struggle.

The opinions voiced by Dalit activists on the promotion of inter-caste marriages as a political strategy ranged from complete approval to absolute rejection. Many former and contemporary DSS leaders and activists thought that the promotion of inter-caste marriages was crucial to reach the goal of a just and equal society without hierarchy and discrimination – and quite a number of activists were themselves married to women from higher castes, whom they had typically met as students in the university. Siddalingaiah was one of the Dalit leaders, who thought that inter-caste marriages had to be promoted as part of the Dalit movement's political strategy. In the 1990s, Siddalingaiah had served as a nominated member of the legislative council in Karnataka and voted for the introduction of an economic reward of 25.000 rupees from the state government to couples marrying in inter-caste marriages. Siddalingaiah had actually himself suggested an incentive of 50.000 rupees even proposed the introduction of a special reservation quota for children of mixed parentage to further encourage inter-caste marriages, but these proposals had not been adopted by the legislative council. A typical argument in favour of inter-caste marriages was that there ought to be only two human castes: men and women – and that all people should therefore mix freely.

Others, among them many BSP activists and members of the new, more culturally oriented Dalit organisations like the DMC – but also many members of the DSS – found that the question of marriage was not really suitable for political intervention because of its decidedly private character or they even thought that inter-marriages were detrimental to the interest of the Scheduled Castes. The typical argument against inter-caste marriages between Scheduled Castes and higher castes was that such marriages tended to drive a wedge between the 'Dalit boy' and his family and community, who thereby lost a valuable male earning member to the upper castes.

When I spoke to a group of young DSS activists in the southern town of H.D. Kote they all stated that they were not in favour of inter-caste marriages, even though they defined the abolition of caste as the ultimate aim of Dalit struggle and declared that they liked the thought of a society free of caste. However, inter-caste marriages were a 'one way traffic', they explained: *'Dalits are marrying upper-caste girls, but not vice versa.'* Thus, inter-caste marriages were regarded as a loss to the Dalit community. *'Suppose a Dalit marries an upper caste girl, the children will still be Dalits,* one of the young men explained: *'Inter-caste marriages will not help. If a Dalit boy marries an upper caste girl, then for her it will be a comfortable life, while a Dalit girl cannot be happy if she is married to a boy from the upper castes, since she will definitely be ill-treated by her in-laws because of her caste background.'* The practice of inter-caste marriage was thus regarded as too costly for the family and community in case of a 'boy' – and too costly for the individual in case of a 'girl' – to be politically feasible.

The same interpretation of inter-caste marriages was expressed by the leader of the 'Karnataka Dalit Christian Federation' (KDCF), Y. Mariswamy: *'It is no problem if a Dalit koolie marries a Brahmin worker, but which type of marriages are we seeing? Through inter-caste marriages, Brahmins are gaining and Dalits are losing.'* The amounts paid by the bride's family as dowry to the groom's family were nowadays huge among the Brahmins, Mariswamy told, *'through inter-caste marriage, they can save their money.'* For many Dalit activists the practice of inter-caste marriage did thus not represent a political solution to caste-based discrimination and humiliation, but quite the contrary a cementation of the existing power relations and a direct threat to intra-caste solidarity.<sup>76</sup>

Often, B.R. Ambedkar's two marriages were invoked as examples to support the arguments either for or against the strategic promotion of inter-caste marriages. Activists in favour of inter-caste marriages called attention to Ambedkar's second and self-chosen marriage with the Brahmin doctor Savita as an example to follow because it was based on the two parties' personal preference for each other and not for the sake of the collective interests of the family and community. Activists, who were against inter-caste marriages on the other hand, regarded Ambedkar's second marriage as an example of how Brahmins would always try to manipulate and exploit Dalits; some even thought that Savita had actually forced Ambedkar to marry her against his will. They instead pointed out Ambedkar's first marriage at the age of fifteen with the nine year old

---

<sup>76</sup> Inter-caste marriages between people from different Scheduled Castes are even rarer than marriages between Scheduled Castes and Brahmins and thus this type of marriage was generally not considered by Dalit activists, when I asked them about their views on inter-caste marriages.



Ramabai from his own caste of Mahars as an example to follow since the education, wealth, and power of Ambedkar in this case favoured people from his own community.<sup>77</sup>

Today, inter-caste marriages are generally 'love marriages', i.e., self-arranged and often romance-based marriages, contrary to the still all-pervasive norm of arranged marriage. To propagate inter-caste marriages as a political strategy is thus also a strong statement in favour of the autonomy of the individual – and against the family and the caste community's influence on the individual's personal preferences and dispositions. As the writer, intellectual, and co-founder of the DSS, Devanoor Mahadev, himself married in an inter-caste marriage, pointed out caste is an obstacle to the human instincts; not least because of the strict observation of caste endogamy, that inhibits 'natural' love and attraction. However, prevalent norms and traditions also affect even rebellious and socially progressive Dalit activists. Therefore, many activists, who were decidedly in favour of inter-caste marriages, were themselves married in same-caste marriages, while a good number of activists that did not attach much political attention to the issue of marriage had actually themselves defied tradition and married outside their own caste. Even strong political convictions and ideals about liberation and equality may thus be difficult to reconcile with the everyday reality of caste for many Dalit activists.<sup>78</sup>

The issue of marriage draws attention to the emotional attachment to one's community and cultural identity that I find is actually an important though largely ignored aspect of caste. As the mother searching for 'a suitable boy' for her daughter in Vikram Seth's famous novel puts it, 'one's own community creates a sense of comfort' (Seth in Fuller 2001: 27).

When I asked a leading DSS activist in Bangalore, why he himself had chosen an arranged marriage with a woman from his own Holeya caste, he told me that marriage is a very intimate matter, in which one has to feel safe and comfortable. Having a good education and career, he had had marriage offers from girls from upper caste families, but even though he dreamt of a society completely free of caste distinctions, he felt that the caste differences between him and a potential upper caste partner would be too large to bridge in his private life. While he firmly believed that the practice of caste was the root cause of the oppression and discrimination of the Scheduled Castes and had to be abolished, he could not help practising it himself, when it came to marriage.

---

<sup>77</sup> Tellingly, I have never seen any posters or pictures of Ambedkar with his second wife, Savita, for sale at Dalit movement functions and events, whereas posters depicting Ambedkar with his first wife Ramabai are quite common.

<sup>78</sup> See Mines (1994) for an analysis of the inherent conflict between the individual and the family/caste.

The issue of marriage – whether to choose a same caste or an inter-caste marriage – thus shows that the political interpretation of caste does not only constitute a strategic dilemma for the movement, but also an emotional dilemma for the individual Dalit activist.

### **A sense of belonging**

While Dalit leaders and activists fought over the definition of Dalit identity, most of them (whether favouring the term Dalit or not) actually preferred to use the expression *namma jana*, ‘our people’ in casual conversation. Contrary to the contested political identities of Dalit, Buddhist and Bahujan Samaj, the highly elastic phrase ‘namma jana’ expressed a sense of personal and emotional belonging; that the subject speaking was not culturally free-floating and socially autonomous, but part of a larger collective ‘we’. As I have shown in the previous paragraphs of this chapter, caste identity is in fact often perceived as a locus of solidarity, intimacy and security. Being together with one’s own, the activists often expressed, meant that they could feel more confident, secure and relaxed, without any fear of being discriminated against. This seemed to be the case for most activists, regardless whether they mainly perceived caste as a repressive hierarchy or as an expression of ethno-cultural difference. On the other hand, most activists also expressed that the community of caste was binding on the individual and in many ways restricted their personal freedom of choice, not only because of the discrimination and exploitation associated with Scheduled Caste identity, but also because of the expectations and large degrees of social control exerted by caste and family members.

When Gorringer (2005), Guru and Chakravarty (2005) and other contemporary scholars criticise the Dalit movement of focusing on a politics of identity formation that reinforces the very institution of caste, they thus insist on defining caste and caste identities as pernicious and detrimental to social progress. As I have shown, however, many Dalit activists themselves in fact experienced their caste identities both as negative and stigmatising labels and as a source of solidarity, community and belonging. The strong sense of belonging and community associated with caste identity explains why the political dilemma between personal emancipation and cultural recognition was not only strategic and ideological, but also highly emotional. It was my impression that most Dalit activists were in fact torn between an urge to become a person in their own right and escape the devastating stigma of untouchability and the contradictory urge to strengthen the social and economic status of their community and gain respect and recognition for their cultural identity. While the Dalit organisations in Karnataka were split between representing caste either as an ‘unnatural’ imposed hierarchy or a ‘natural’ reflection of

ethno-cultural differences, the personal experience of caste thus often both contained aspects of hierarchy and difference.

To foreshadow the conclusion of the thesis, I think that it is in the encounter between the two very different ways of perceiving and representing the meaning of caste and Dalit identity that we shall find the deeper, underlying reason for the political and organisational splits of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. As Jayaram (1996) notes the two dominant understandings of castes as, respectively, a rigid, hierarchical *system* and a dynamic *structural principle* based on cultural difference are equally true, though they appear to be mutually exclusive. Most Dalit activists did indeed, to different degrees, describe their caste identity both as a stigmatising, imposed label and as a source of community, belonging and in some cases even pride and thus related to caste as representing both hierarchy and difference.

The schism between universalist and communitarian ways of politicising identity is, as I pointed out in the introduction, not unique to the Dalit movement, but is indeed found in most identity-based social movements (cf. Bernstein 1997, 2005; Gamson 1995; Heyes 2012; Jasper 2010). For all stigmatised identity groups, whether ethnic, racial, sexual or gendered, the politicisation of identity is giving reason to the same profound dilemma between a politics of mainstreaming or ‘personal emancipation’, as I have termed it, and a politics of separatism or ‘cultural recognition’ that respectively denies and emphasises the existence of profound cultural or biological differences between the stigmatised group and the mainstream society. In all cases, the resulting political splits within identity-based social movements may be explained with reference to the ambiguous relationship between self-identity and cultural identity causing the contradictory political impulses of mainstreaming and separatism. In the case of the Dalit movement in Karnataka, the ambiguity of caste reinforces the dilemma between personal emancipation and cultural recognition since the oversimplified and incompatible models of hierarchy and difference stimulate contradictory interpretations of the reasons for the oppression and discrimination of the Scheduled Castes.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that the political schism between universalist and communitarian ideals of liberation and equality that deeply divides the Dalit movement in Karnataka does not only reflect a strategic political dilemma for the leaders and activists of the movement, but also a personal and emotional dilemma. Although most activists had very strong opinions about the nature of caste, many found it difficult to act in accordance with their political convictions in their private lives, for example, in

relation to the decisive decision about whom to marry. The personal dilemmas related to the politicisation of caste were, I argue, related to the ambiguous reality of caste as representing both a repressive hierarchy and a manifestation of ethno-cultural difference and to the often conflicting interests of the individual and the community.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, I have shown how the political and ideological splits that characterised the Dalit movement in Karnataka in the early 2000s – and continue to characterise the movement by the 2010s – reflect a number of deep-seated ambiguities pertaining to the notion of Dalit identity and its politicisation.

Examining the history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka, I have shown that the movement right since its emergence has been marked by a strategic dilemma between a universalist quest for personal emancipation and a communitarian quest for cultural recognition. The politicisation of Dalit identity has thus always constituted a genuine dilemma to the Dalit movement that has balanced between representing Dalits as the downtrodden, stigmatised victims of caste oppression and as bearers of a rich cultural tradition bereft of due recognition. While the changed political environment of the 1990s may explain the immediate reasons behind the Dalit movement's sudden thorough fragmentation, I have argued that the underlying reasons for the conflicting political agendas existing within the movement must be sought in the ambiguous meanings attributed to identity and caste.

The study shows that caste membership for most Dalit activists is filled with mixed emotions, at the same time constituting a source of anxiety, shame and inferiority and a source of pride, security and solidarity. The seemingly insoluble dilemma between the wish for inclusion into the so-called 'mainstream' and the wish for cultural recognition of the Scheduled Castes as a respectable and dignified community thus reflects the overall ambiguity of the political identity of Dalit. With caste being commonly interpreted both as an ancient, religiously legitimised status hierarchy integrating all castes in a common system and as a dynamic social structure of autonomous, ethno-cultural communities competing for status and power, the political answer to the continuing discrimination and exploitation of the Scheduled Castes largely depends on which of the two interpretations that is emphasised.

When a growing number of Dalit organisations in the early 2000s interpreted caste primarily as an expression of ethno-cultural difference it must be explained with reference to a number of interrelated reasons. The consolidation of the categories of caste – and of their hierarchical order – resulting from the continuation and extension of the reservation policies to the large section of Other Backward Classes in the early 1990s, has, as described in chapter three, made it difficult even to imagine an abolition of caste

in many years to come. Quite the contrary, caste has become an increasingly central issue of Indian politics the past decades with the help of the Dalit movement that strongly supported the extension of reservation benefits to the OBCs.

The increased strength of the Hindu nationalist movement and ideology is another factor, which may explain why a considerable number of Dalit activists were defending a communitarian approach to Dalit liberation. The rightist ideology of Hindu nationalism that, on the one hand, included the Scheduled Castes into the Hindu fold and, on the other, maintained their subordinate status in the Hindu hierarchy, was in fact used both as an argument for a community centred politics of strengthening the Scheduled Castes and for a radical anti-caste politics, since most Dalit activists regarded political Hinduism as the greatest enemy of the Scheduled Castes.

The ideological turn in the Indian academia from the grand theories of the modern period to the post-structuralist and post-colonial theories influencing the universities from the 1990s onwards has, as suggested in chapter five, further contributed to the gradual and partial shift of focus from the individual to the community.

A last reason that I will point out, which this thesis has discussed only cursorily, is the tensions between different identity groups within the Dalit movement that have increased since the 1990s. As described in chapter three, the political solidarity between the Scheduled Castes symbolised by the identity of Dalit has never been extended to everyday life, despite the overwhelming support of the Dalit movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The political alliance between notably Holeyas and Madigas therefore relies on the identification of common courses like the struggles against caste and untouchability, while the increasingly important issues of reservation and cultural identity, on the other hand, encourage caste consciousness and separate mobilisation.

Altogether the here mentioned factors all seem to have contributed to the political reorientation of large parts of the Dalit movement and to the increased schism of the movement.

As we have seen, the communitarian tendencies within the Dalit movement have been criticised of consolidating the very social structures and identities that cause the oppression of the Scheduled Castes. However, the present study suggests that the struggle for cultural recognition may as well be interpreted as a radical challenge to the 'untouchable' identity ascribed to the majority of the Scheduled Caste population and to the socially dominant norms and values of the 'upper castes'. From a scholarly point of view, the schism between politics of personal emancipation and cultural recognition should not be evaluated in terms of their political 'progressivity', but understood as representing two radically different visions of a socially equal and just Indian society.

While the Dalit movement is profoundly split with regard to the representation of Dalit identity, most scholars (e.g., Deliége 2001; Gorringer 2005b; Madsen 1996; Mosse 1999) and national and international NGOs (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2001, IDSIN 2002) agree to define Dalit identity in accordance with its original meaning, representing a 'broken' and downtrodden state of being. As the study shows, this representation of Dalit identity is but one aspect of the complex identifications available to people from the Scheduled Castes. The emotional attachment that many Dalit activists feel with their caste communities is an aspect of Dalit identity which has largely been neglected by scholars of the Dalit movement.

Therefore, I find that the personal and political ambivalences and dilemmas connected with the politicisation of Dalit identity that I have pointed out are the most important findings of the study.

The realisation that the political struggle against caste-based exploitation and discrimination is not a straightforward matter, but filled with conflicts, dilemmas and ambiguities, is a reminder to scholars as well as (inter)national NGOs and advocacy networks that in different ways seek to aid and influence the Dalit movement that there are no politically neutral positions in support of the Scheduled Castes. Whether the identity of Dalit is represented as 'broken' and downtrodden or as culturally rich and vibrant, it constitutes a political statement in the ongoing debate about the means and aims of the Dalit movement. The findings of the present study moreover marks a break with the idea of a coherent 'Dalit constituency' based on shared identity and common political interests. As we have seen the Scheduled Castes in Karnataka do not only identify themselves in a multitude of different ways, they also pursue widely different political aims and interests.

For the Dalit movement in Karnataka, the realisation of the profound ambiguities and dilemmas connected with the politicisation of Dalit identity may lead to a better understanding of the reasons for the current splits and conflicts. The loss of the unity and solidarity that originally was the very *raison d'être* of the Dalit movement was a source of great frustration for Dalit leaders and activists from all parts of the movement. Again and again during the fieldwork, I was asked if I thought that my study could somehow help bringing the Dalits back on a common platform. This is obviously not the case. Quite the contrary, I hope that a growing realisation of the many profoundly different political strategies and positions within the Dalit movement will lead to a greater acceptance of the present situation where the struggle for equality, freedom and social justice for the Scheduled Castes is fought by many different means on many different fronts.

## Bibliography

Ambedkar, B.R.

2003 [1936] The Annihilation of Caste. In: Valerian Rodrigues (ed.). *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2008 [1945] *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables?* Delhi: Gautam Book Centre.

Assadi, Muzaffar H.

1997 *Peasant Movement in Karnataka 1980-1994*. Delhi: Shirpa Publications.

Assadi, Muzaffar H. and S. Rajendran

2000 Karnataka: Changing Shape of Caste Conflict. In: *Economical and Political Weekly* 35(19), pp. 1610-1612.

Bernstein, Mary

1997 Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Use of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement. *American Journal of Sociology* 103(3), pp. 531-65.

2005 Identity Politics. *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, pp. 47-74.

Béteille, André

1986. 'The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India'. *European Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 1, pp. 297-318.

Brimnes, Niels

1999 *Constructing the Colonial Encounter. Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India*. Surrey: Curzon.

Charsley, Simon

1996 "Untouchable": What is in a Name? *Journal of the Royal anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 2, no. 1, pp. 1-23.

1998 'Chapter Two. Caste, Cultural Resources, and Social Mobility'. In: Simon Charsley and G.K. Karanth (Eds.) *Challenging Untouchability. Dalit Initiative and Experience from Karnataka*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

2010 'Untouchable Identity and Its Reconstruction'. In: Mikael Aktor and Robert Deliège (eds.). *From Stigma to Assertion. Untouchability, Identity and Politics in Early and Modern India*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Charsley, Simon and G.K. Karanth (eds.)



- 1998            *Challenging Untouchability. Dalit Initiative and Experience from Karnataka*. New Delhi, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Chigateri, Shraddha
- 2008            'Glory to the Cow': Cultural Difference and Social Justice in the Food Hierarchy in India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* vol. 31(1), pp. 10-35.
- Ciotti, Manuela
- 2010            *Retro-modern India. Forging the Low-caste Self*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Daniel, E. Valentine
- 1987            *Fluid Signs. Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Deshpande, S.V. and Vijay K.N. Torgal
- 2003            Land Reforms in Karnataka. Impact on Beneficiaries. *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(44), pp. 4647-4649.
- Deliège, Robert
- 2001            *The Untouchables of India*. Oxford & New York: Berg Publishers.
- Deshpande, G.P.
- 2002            'Of Hope and Melancholy. Reading Jotirao Phule in Our Times.' In: Deshpande (Ed.), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule. Edited, with annotations and introduction, by G.P. Deshpande*. New Delhi: LeftWord, pp. 1-21.
- Deshpande, S.V. & Vijay K.N. Torgal
- 2003            'Land Reforms in Karnataka: Impact on Beneficiaries'. *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(44), pp. 4647-4649.
- Dirks, Nicholas B.
- 2002            *Castes of Mind. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Dumont, Louis
- 2002            *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implication*. Complete Revised English Edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Epp, Linda J.
- 2003            Dalit Struggle, Nude Worship and the 'Chandragutti Incident'. In: Sharmilla Rege (ed.) *Sociology of Gender. The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Fosse, Lars Martin

- 2000           Politikk og Opprinnelse. Det ariske spørsmål i indisk politisk debatt. In: *Nærbilder av India. Samfunn, politikk og utvikling*. Kathinka Frøystad, Eldrid Mageli og Arild Engelsen Ruud (Eds.). Oslo: Cappelen Akademisk Forlag.
- Fraser, Nancy
- 1995           From Redistribution to Recognition: Dilemmas of justice in a “post-socialist” age. *New Left Review* 1/ 212, pp. 68-93.
- 2000           Rethinking Recognition. *New Left Review* 3, pp. 107-120.
- Fuller, C.J.
- 2001           Introduction: Caste Today. In: C.J. Fuller (ed.) *Caste Today*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gamson, Joshua
- 1995           ‘Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma.’ *Social Problems* 42(3), pp. 390-407.
- Ganesh, Mogalli
- 2003           Unpublished paper presented at the seminar ‘Diversity and Affirmative Action in the Era of Privatisation’ at the National Law School of India, Bangalore, 19-20 April 2003.
- Gorringe, Hugo
- 2005a           *Untouchable Citizens. Dalit movement and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- 2005b           ‘You build your house, we’ll build ours’: The Attractions and Pitfalls of Dalit Identity Politics. *Social Identities* 11(6), pp. 653-72.
- Gowda, Chandan
- 2010           ‘Many Lohias? Appropriations of Lohia in Karnataka’. *Economic and Political Weekly* 45(40), pp. 78-84.
- Gupta, Dipankar
- 2000           *Interrogating Caste. Understanding hierarchy & difference in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- 2004           Introduction: The certitudes of caste: When identity trumps hierarchy. In: Dipankar Gupta (ed.). *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy?* New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications.
- 2005           Caste and Politics: Identity over System. *Annual Review of Sociology* 34, pp. 409-27.

- Guru, Gopal  
2001 Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity. In: Romila Thapar (ed.). *India. Another Millenium?* New Delhi, London, New York, Ringwood, Toronto, Albany: Penguin Books.
- Guru, Gopal and Anuradha Chakravarty  
2005 Who are the Country's poor? Social Movement politics and Dalit Poverty. In: *Social Movements in India. Poverty, Power, and Politics*. Raka Ray and Mary F. Katzenstein (eds.). Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
- Hardtmann, Eva-Maria  
2003 'Our Fury is Burning'. *Local Practice and Global Connections in the Dalit Movement*. Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, vol. 54.
- Hervik, Peter  
2001 Narration of Shifting Maya Identities. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20(3), pp. 342-59.
- Jacob, T.G. with P. Bandhu  
2002 *Reflections on the Caste Question: The Dalit Situation in South India*. Bangalore: NESA (New Entity for Social Action).
- Japhet, S.  
1997 *Social movement and Social Change: A Study of Dalit Movement in Karnataka*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Sociology, Bangalore University.
- Jasper, James  
2010 'Strategic Marginalizations, Emotional Marginalities: The Dilemma of Stigmatized identities.' In: Debal K. SinghaRoy (ed.) *Surviving Against Odds: The Marginalized in a Globalizing World*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Jayaram, N.  
1996 Caste and Hinduism. Changing Protean Relationship. In: M.N. Srinivas (ed.). *Caste. Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. New Delhi: Viking.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe.  
2000 Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization in India: Changing Identities and Caste Politics before Mandal. *Asian Survey* 40(5), pp. 756-66.
- Jeffrey, Craig  
2001 'A fist is stronger than five fingers': caste and dominance in rural north India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS 26(2), pp. 217-236.
- Jenkins, R.

- 2000                    Categorization: Identity, Social Process and Epistemology. *Current Sociology* 48(3), pp. 7-25.
- Keer, Dhananjay  
2002 [1954]    *Dr. Ambedkar. Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.
- Lerche, Jens  
2008                    'Transnational Advocacy Networks and Affirmative Action for *Dalits* in India.' *Development and Change* 39, 2, pp. 239-261.
- Madsen, Aase Mygind  
1996                    *Untouchables: Stuck at the Bottom or Moving Upward? A Study of Changing Conditions for the Scheduled Castes in Five Villages in Karnataka, South India*. Ph.D. dissertation, Center for Udviklingsforskning, København.
- Meyer, David. S.  
2002                    Opportunities and Identities. Bridge-Building in the Study of Social Movements. In: *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State*. David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier and Belinda Robnett (Eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mines, Mattison  
1994                    *Public Faces, Private Voices. Community and Individuality in South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mosse, David  
1999                    'Responding to Subordination'. In: Campbell, John R. and Alan Rew (eds.), *Identity and Affect: Experiences of Identity in a Globalising World*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 64-104.
- Nagaraj, D.R.  
1993                    *The Flaming Feet. A study of the Dalit Movement in India*. Bangalore: South Forum Press.
- 1994                    From Political Rage to Cultural affirmation: Notes on the Kannada Dalit Poet-Activist Siddalingaiah. *India International Centre Quarterly* 21 (4), pp. 15-26.
- Omvedt, Gail  
1993                    *Reinventing Revolution. New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- 1994                    *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution. Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Pai, Suddha

2001 'From Harijans to Dalits: Identity Formation, Political Consciousness and Electoral Mobilisation of the Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh. In: In: G. Shah (ed.). *Dalit Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

2002 *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution. The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications.

Pinto, Ambrose

1996 Karnataka: Atrocities on Dalits: Dalit Sangarshan Samithi's Response. In: Walter Fernandes (ed.), *The Emerging Dalit Identity: The re-assertion of the subalterns*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.

della Porta, Donatella and Mario Diani

2006 *Social Movements. An Introduction*. Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

Rajshakar, V.T.

2002 *Caste a nation within the nation. Recipe for a bloodless revolution*. Bangalore: Books for Change.

Reddy, Deepa S.

2005 The Ethnicity of Caste. *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (3), pp. 543-84.

Rodrigues, Valerian

2003 'Introduction'. In: Valerian Rodrigues (ed.). *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2006 'The Dalit Bahujan discourse in Modern India'. In: V.R. Mehta & Thomas Pantham (eds.). *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

2010 *Transition without a Say: Dalit Organizations and Neoliberal Transformation in Karnataka*. Unpublished paper presented at the conference on 'Mobility or Marginalization? Dalits in Neoliberal India'. Oxford University, 1-2 September 2010.

Samel, Swapna

2004 *Dalit Movement in South India (1857-1950)*. New Delhi: Serials Publications.

Shah, Ghanshyam

2001a Introduction: Dalit Politics. In: G. Shah (ed.). *Dalit Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

- 2001b Dalit Movements and the Search for Identity. In: G. Shah (ed.). *Dalit Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Shetty, V.T. Rajshekar  
1978 *Dalit Movement in Karnataka*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society.
- Siddalingaiah  
2002 Four Poems. *Chandrabhaga* 5 (literary journal published from Cuttack, Orissa).
- 2003 *Ooru Kéri (An Autobiography)*. Translated from Kannada by S.R. Ramakrishna. Bangalore: Sahitya Academy.
- Skaria, Ajay  
1997 'Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India'. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3, pp.726-45.
- Srinivas, M.N.  
1996 Introduction. In: M.N. Srinivas (ed.). *Caste. Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. New Delhi: Viking.
- 2003 An Orbitalary on Caste as a System. *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(5), pp. 455-59.
- Srinivas, M. N. and M. N. Panini  
1984 Politics and Society in Karnataka *Economic and Political Weekly* 19(2), pp. 69-75.
- Sökefeld, Martin  
1999 Debating Self, Identity, and Culture in Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 40(4), pp. 417-447.
- o'Toole, Therese  
2003 Secularising the Sacred Cow: The Relationship between Religious Reform and Hindu. In: Antony Copley (Ed.), *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampraday*. Place: Oxford University Press.
- Yadav, Manohar  
1998 'The Career of Dalit Movement in Karnataka', *Journal of Social and Economic Development* 1(1), published by Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore.
- Zald, Mayer N. and John D. McCarthy  
1987 Social Movement Industries: Competition and Conflict among SMOs. In: *Social Movements in an Organizational Society: Collected Essays*. Mayer

N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (Eds.). New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Zelliot, Eleanor

2001 *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar.

### Internet Resources

Bahujan Samaj Party

2012 Official website of the Bahujan Samaj Party. Available at: (<http://www.bspindia.org>) [Accessed May 3 2012]

Dalit Voice by V.T. Rajshekar

No date Online editions of selected issues of the magazine Dalit voice. Available at: <http://www.dalitvoice.org> [Accessed May 27 2011]

Famiglietti, Antonio

2001 *For a Realist Definition of Social Movements*. Paper presented at the conference 'Debating Realism(s)'. Roskilde University, Denmark, 17-19 August 2001. Available at: [http://www.criticalrealism.com/archive/iacr\\_conference\\_2001/afamiglietti\\_frdsml.pdf](http://www.criticalrealism.com/archive/iacr_conference_2001/afamiglietti_frdsml.pdf) [Accessed October 30 2011]

Frontline

2006 'Victims, still'. Cover story in Frontline vol. 23. issue 25, December 16-29. Available at: <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2325/fl232500.htm> [Accessed May 3 2012]

Government of India (GoI)

2007 *Karnataka Development Report*, Planning Commission. New Delhi: Academic Foundation. Available at: <http://www.isec.ac.in/karnataka-development-KDR.htm> [Accessed May 27 2011]

Government of India (GoI)

2010 *History of Indian Census*. Ministry of Home Affairs. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India. Available at: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Data\\_Products/Library/Indian\\_perceptive\\_link/History\\_link/censushistory.htm](http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Library/Indian_perceptive_link/History_link/censushistory.htm) [Accessed August 14 2011].

Government of Karnataka (GoK)

2006 *Karnataka Human Development Report 2005*. Planning and Statistics Department, Bangalore. Available at:

- [http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/stateplan/sdr\\_pdf/shdr\\_kar05.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/stateplan/sdr_pdf/shdr_kar05.pdf)  
[Accessed May 27 2011]
- Heyes, Cressida  
2012 *Identity Politics*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at:  
<http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/identity-politics> [Accessed May 3 2012]
- Indian Social Institute (ISI), Bangalore  
2010 Official website of the ISI, Bangalore. Available at: Available at:  
<http://www.isiblr.org> [Accessed May 3 2012]
- International Dalit Solidarity Network (ISDN)  
No date Official website of the ISDN. Available at: <http://www.idsn.org> [Accessed May 3 2012]
- International Dalit Solidarity Network (ISDN)  
2002 *I'm Dalit, How are You?* Video, 11:16 minutes. Available at:  
<http://idsn.org/news-resources/video/im-dalit-how-are-you> [Accessed May 3 2012]
- National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)  
No date Official website of the NCDHR. Available at: <http://www.ncdhr.org.in>  
[Accessed May 3 2012]



## **ABSTRACT**

The thesis addresses the growing political and ideological splits and disagreements in the Dalit movement in the south Indian state of Karnataka in the early 2000s.

The Dalit movement in Karnataka was one of the first collective struggles for the rights of the Scheduled Castes in India – and probably the longest sustained. By the turn of the century, however, the Dalit movement had lost its former political strength and was marked by splits and internal rivalry to the great frustration of many activists and sympathisers. While some parts of the Dalit movement blamed the social and economic deprivation of the Scheduled Castes on the institution of caste, which they considered intrinsically oppressive and discriminatory, still more Dalit activists and organisations voiced the opinion that caste was an integral, even natural part of Indian culture and history which could and should not be abolished. The Dalit movement was thus profoundly divided between organisations and groupings sticking to the original anti-caste agenda of the movement and newer organisations and groupings claiming that it was the unequal distribution of power, wealth and social status between the different castes in the Indian society which was the problem, not the institution of caste itself.

Based on eleven months ethnographic fieldwork among leaders, activists and sympathisers from a number of different Dalit organisations and groupings in Karnataka, the study examines the reasons for the increasing political division of the Dalit movement and asks why large parts of the Dalit movement in reality have abandoned the struggle against caste and untouchability in favour of a struggle for cultural recognition and political power.

Examining the early history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka, the study shows that the movement right since its emergence in the early 1970s has been marked by a schism between what I have termed as ‘a politics of personal emancipation’ stressing the need to set the individual free from the oppressive stigma of untouchability and ‘a politics of cultural recognition’ stressing the need to restore the cultural pride of the Scheduled Castes and gain power collectively. The schism was accentuated in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, when the issue of identity assumed centre stage in Indian politics and claims for cultural recognition by various identity groups began to overshadow claims for economic redistribution and social justice. The politicisation of Dalit identity has thus always constituted a genuine dilemma to the Dalit movement that has balanced between representing Dalits as the downtrodden, stigmatised victims of caste oppression and as bearers of a rich cultural tradition bereft of due recognition. Though the changed political environment of the 1990s may explain the immediate

reasons behind the Dalit movement's sudden thorough fragmentation, the thesis argues that the underlying reasons for the conflicting political agendas existing within the movement must be sought in the ambiguous meanings attributed to the notions of identity and caste.

The study shows that an important factor in explaining the political split of the Dalit movement is the oversimplified dichotomy of hierarchy and difference that has characterised the representation of caste in India since the early twentieth century. As established representations of caste, the largely incompatible models of hierarchy and difference stimulate contradictory interpretations of the reasons for the oppression and discrimination of the Scheduled Castes and lead to conflicting political strategies for its solution. While activists agitating for the abolition of caste generally described caste as a repressive, religiously embedded hierarchy, activists agitating for the need of cultural recognition and political power, on the other hand, usually described caste as a social manifestation of profound ethno-cultural difference. Within the Dalit movement caste was thus represented either as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the upper castes or as a potential source of social and political strength and cultural belonging.

Interviews with leaders and activists from the Dalit movement in Karnataka, however, show that their personal experiences of caste in almost all cases related both to the hierarchical and cultural dimensions of caste and that many in their private lives actually found it difficult to act in accordance with their political convictions when it came to the issue of caste: e.g., in relation to the decisive decision about whom to marry. Neither of the two dominant representations of caste did thus adequately correspond to the Dalit activists' actual experiences of caste and caste identity as elastic and contextual realities. Nonetheless the idioms of hierarchy and difference continued to provide the basic language for discussing the overall political disagreements within the Dalit movement and thus contributed to the frozen conflict between old-time anti-caste organisations and newer 'pro-caste' organisations.